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**OWNERSHIP OF NEWSPAPERS:
The View from Positivist
Social Science**

by

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OWNERSHIP OF NEWSPAPERS: The View from the Positivist Social Sciences

A.J. Liebling's often quoted comment, "freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one,"¹ assumes that ownership matters. Certainly, the importance of ownership is assumed by most media critics who decry the trend toward ever greater concentration of ownership of the media.² This essay considers whether the assumption is correct or, more precisely, evaluates the support for the assumption offered by social science research that has examined ownership of newspapers.

This literature review supports four claims. First, chain ownership matters and has mostly objectionable effects. Second, this is true even though most summaries of the research curiously claim either that the evidence supports the view that chain ownership has no particular bad effects or that the evidence is entirely inconclusive. (I acknowledge the virtually inevitable inconclusiveness — the supportable claim is that the research provides relatively clear evidence.) Third, too often the methodological sloppiness of research published even in the field's best scholarly journals makes understanding the research difficult.³ Fourth, and perhaps most important, problems inherent in the positivist social science methodology gravely limit the relevance that these studies can offer on the key judgmental questions concerning media ownership. In fact, often the research fails to shed light on the key issue, the significance of ownership. This failure potentially constrains policy thinking precisely when, if better formulated, the research could help guide policy related to an institution that plays a central role in the country's politics and presumably in people's lives. For these reasons, Part III examines methodological inadequacies and comments on the importance of questions ignored by the existing research.

I. Like the Tobacco Industry's Report on Smoking, the Newspaper Industry's Report On Ownership Is That the Evidence Is Inconclusive

It is not surprising to find extensive research on chain ownership.⁴ Other than the trend toward monopoly daily newspapers in almost all cities, probably the most commented upon aspect of the structure of the newspaper industry

is the trend toward chain ownership — or, as described by sympathetic observers, toward newspaper "groups."⁵ This focus probably reflects Liebling's assumption that ownership is important and the suspicion that the chain form is bad. A survey found that 70 percent of journalism educators and 70 percent of "national leaders" (although only 25 percent of editors and publishers) believe "concentration of media ownership is a threat to the free flow of information to the public."⁶

In a typical summary assessment of research on chain ownership, Gerald Stone writes: "The overwhelming outcome of these studies is: There is no discernible, adverse effect consistently attributable to newspaper chain ownership."⁷ Stone can even refer to this conclusion in an almost off hand manner, for instance in saying, "[w]hen it became clear chain ownership could not be linked with a pattern of adverse effects on the public, ..."⁸ And he concludes:

Chain ownership has the potential of either improving or decreasing [sic] the journalistic product, but certainly there is no consistent documentation that group ownership of newspapers is inherently bad. The chief changes likely to occur with chain ownership are related to economic considerations, primarily: Chains have a distinct economic advantage derived from their experience and expertise in management, marketing and use of the economies of scale. Evidence is that this financial planning sophistication can make newspapers more profitable businesses without debasing the journalistic product.⁹

These observations have a significant policy implication — they support the status quo. This policy importance makes it relevant to see how well Stone supports his implicitly conservative findings.

Stone described eighteen research studies in the section of his book, "The Weight of Chains," from which the conclusion I quoted was taken. Although these studies might be expected to focus on comparing chain with non-chain ownership, instead, half either examined the effects of local newspaper competition or compared ownership by different chains. Admittedly, discussions of the decline in local newspaper competition are often combined with discus-

sions of the increase in chain ownership. Both relate to the decline in the number of different media voices and to the trend toward consolidation within the industry. Still, the issues are different. One trend but not the other could have a bad (or good) effect on newspaper quality. Thus, half the studies simply do not relate to the question of significance of chain ownership.

These subtractions left only eight studies relevant to his claim.¹⁰ Of course, readings of data can be controversial. Nevertheless, on what I think is the best reading, five of these articles observe negative effects associated with chain ownership while three find no identifiable effect. None pointed the other way. Moreover, Stone made no significant attempt to discredit the five studies finding negative effects. Without examining the importance or generalizability of the effects found, this counting cannot be taken to have shown chains to be a significant problem. But surely any accurate summary must note that this research indicates that chain ownership has discernible adverse effects. Stone's contrary conclusion is quite curious.

In Stone's summary, five of eight relevant studies suggested negative effects of chain ownership. But what if the numbers were reversed? This poses the question of the significance of studies put into the different categories. If most studies do not find an effect but a few do, should the conclusion be that "[t]he preponderance of studies find that various newspaper competitive situations have little or no impact on content performance."¹¹ Although looking at a different question, namely whether newspaper competition makes a difference for content performance, authors of another study reached precisely this conclusion after citing fourteen studies that "support this lack of relationship" and seven that "present some evidence" of differences.

The implicit conclusion that lack of findings about a factor is evidence that the factor lacks impact is simply wrong. Merely being unable to reject (with adequate degrees of certainty) the null hypothesis that there is no difference does not provide evidence of no difference. For example, if police investigators find the murder weapon with the primary suspect's fingerprints and a note in the suspect's handwriting laying out the plan for the murder in only two of the hundred places they look, the police should not conclude that the evidence supports no conclusion because the vast majority of the searches (ninety-eight) found nothing. Certainly it would be misleading to say that the preponderance of

the searches show that the suspect is innocent. Rather, what should be admitted is that some of the searches turned out not to have been useful. But the only searches providing evidence are the two that pointed to guilt. Likewise, in the twenty-one studies referred to above or Stone's eight, the only studies, hence the "preponderance," providing evidence are those that found that competition or ownership made a difference.

* * *

Stone's unsupported summary conclusion resembles many made in the literature. Using a regression analysis, John Busterna, Kathleen Hansen, and Jean Ward found some differences between the resources employed by chains and independents. Chains apparently provided less staff inputs but more non-personnel resource inputs such as number of wire services, databases and database search expenditures. But the authors concluded that the differences were sufficiently small to warrant the conclusion that "chain ownership ... do[es] not have a significant impact on these resource measures of content performance."¹²

These authors' literature review had found that "[p]ast studies of the relationship between chain ownership and content performance show mixed results," noting seven empirical studies that find evidence that chains do perform better, thirteen finding that chains do worse, and eleven finding essentially no differences.¹³ These authors properly refrained from suggesting that a thirteen to seven count indicates that chain ownership is mostly bad. If, for example, the thirteen showed chain-ownership made papers slightly worse than independents in various trivial ways (although, of course, what is or is not trivial is likely to be contested), even one study showing chain ownership making papers significantly better in some vitally important respect would justify the claim that the literature shows chains to be better. Thus, pending further examination, this listing of seven studies reporting that chains are better in some respects and thirteen finding they are worse suggests that something plausible can be said for both sides and that the results are "mixed." Still, an appropriate first step in checking this interpretation is to examine the seven empirical studies purportedly demonstrating some merit of chains to see if that merit relates to something of importance. This examination supports a more troubling conclusion.

Of the seven, four noted some difference between chains and independents without

making any claim that the result associated with chains was preferable. John C. Schweitzer, David H. Weaver and Gerald C. Stone reported that their surprising finding — that, in cities with morning and evening newspapers, dual subscribers were more common when the papers were more similar in content and appearance — did not hold when the papers were chain-owned.¹⁴ But it is not easy, to say the least, to see why this says anything about whether chains or independents are better and the article made no claim in that connection. In a second study, Joseph C. Pilegge found that Alabama's national chain-owned papers were more likely ($p < .01$) than locally-owned papers (independents) to endorse Republican candidates for Presidential, Senate, House, and Governor races between 1962 and 1978. The author, of course, made no claim that more Republican endorsements showed that chains were better.¹⁵

Bryon St. Dizier looked at 1984 Presidential endorsements at both chain and independent papers.¹⁶ Although editorial page editors in the surveyed chain-owned and independent papers almost equally indicated that publishers consulted the editorial staff in determining endorsements (64 percent at independents and 61 percent at chains),¹⁷ these self-reports may mask ambiguity. As a group, chain editors were slightly more likely to personally support Mondale over Reagan (57 percent to 35 percent) than independent editors (58 percent to 40 percent). The chain-owned papers' endorsements, however, favored Reagan much more (65 percent to 25 percent) than did the evenly split independents (44 percent to 44 percent).¹⁸ Apparently editors' views prevailed much more at the independently-owned papers.¹⁹ Many media professionals and media critics treat editorial independence, sometimes called "editorial integrity," as an important positive value. Of course, practices in respect to presidential endorsements may be comparatively unique — the one area in which publishers would claim authority. Nevertheless, following the implicit assumption of the study that presidential endorsement practices provide a good indicator of editorial independence, the article provides evidence of merit in independent ownership.

A plausible hypothesis is that chain *publishers* more so than independent *publishers* emphasize business concerns over editorial/service. If so, *editorial* independence may be even more important for the public in chains than independents, and then the study's findings of less independence in chains would be even more

damning. In any event, possibly the study's clearest finding is that the trend toward chain-ownership "appears likely [to place] newspaper ownership ... in increasingly conservative hands."²⁰ But this presumably is not the justification for Busterna counting St. Dizier's article as showing empirically that chain ownership is better.

A fourth comparison of chains and independents examined journalists' role commitments along three valences — orientation toward their geographic community, their profession, and their organization.²¹ Patrick R. Parsons, John Finnegan, Jr., and William Beneham gave reasons, relating to ambitions for advancement within the organization, for expecting editorial-level employees of chains to have greater commitment to their organizational role and less toward their profession and especially less toward the community than editors at independent papers.²² The authors did not offer evaluative conclusions. However, any perspective that assumes that a newsperson should be committed to her community or her professional role must count the article as evidencing evils of chain ownership. Thus, of these four articles purportedly showing merit in chain ownership, none supported that view and two arguably pointed the other way.

Two other cited articles were case studies of single papers. Given almost universal agreement within the profession that both good and bad versions of both chain and independent papers exist and that chain ownership sometimes makes a paper worse, sometimes better, a study of an individual paper is unlikely to justify claims concerning the desirability of chains. Although good case studies provide insight into how things work — often much better insight than most statistical treatments, and thus should not be disparaged — these two were woefully inadequate to support any claim concerning chains.

In one, Dean Flatt described how a particular chain-owned paper implemented an incentive scheme, including bonuses and stock-options. Flatt gave reasons to expect that this scheme could improve editor performance from the perspective of the corporation and that the improved performance could lead to better newspaper quality.²³ The article, however, gave no evidence that the incentive scheme works effectively. Nor did it even consider whether the chain's incentive scheme would lead to performance superior to that produced by independent papers' different incentive systems. Although

Flatt implied that the study undermines Ben Bagdikian's assertion that "the professional journalist and the economic interests of the newspaper groups are at odds,"²⁴ at most the study shows how one chain paper tried to create "synergy" between its goals (which could be for profit, not quality) and the goals of its editors (that is, the incentive scheme is intended to lead the editor to adopt the corporation's goals). This demonstration hardly engages with Bagdikian's analysis. And it provides no evidence that chains are better than independents.

W.I. Romanow and W.C. Soderlund examined front page leads and editorial and op-ed pages of the *Windsor Star* before and after being purchased by Southam Press, a Canadian chain.²⁵ Although an awfully slim basis for generalizations, the authors conclude that in this particular case the chain ownership "does not appear to have led to abuse."²⁶ But, of course, lack of abuse hardly suggests that chain ownership was beneficial. Still, the only (noted) negative event connected with the chain ownership was the virtual disappearance of the paper's previously independent Ottawa bureau. In contrast, the authors observe that the new ownership "offer[ed] its readers a greater Canadian perspective" and provided "increased vigor in [its] editorial pages" and that this material was "not geared to pressing the political fortunes of any one political party."²⁷ The trouble is that, as the authors properly emphasize, the study provides no direct evidence of "causality."²⁸ The slight increase in use of material originating in and concerning Canada, arguably the central and most praised change, could easily reflect more general contemporaneous changes occurring politically and culturally within Canada that would have equally influenced the paper if it had remained independent.²⁹

Moreover, Romanow and Soderlund's reading of their own data is unpersuasive.³⁰ An easy prediction is that a troubling impact of chain-ownership will involve changes in the authorship of content — e.g. news and features.³¹ This expectation is borne out. The single biggest change in source of content in the *Windsor Star's* front page leads was the increased reliance on Southam News Service. Of eight identified sources for feature material, the chain's news service moved from being last (previously supplying .2 percent) to being the largest source (supplying 26.3 percent).³²

Also questionable is the authors' interpretation of the change in the paper's political stance as not having a political bias but only being

increasingly critical toward the party in power, the conservatives in the province and the liberals nationally. Such a change could indicate increased vigor in the paper's performance of its watchdog function. But closer examination casts doubt on this benign conclusion. Defining "pro-liberal orientation" as the percentage of features that were pro-liberal or anti-conservative minus the percentage that were pro-conservative or anti-liberal, at the provincial level the paper showed only a slight increase in the pro-liberal line, from 14.4 percent before buyout to 18.7 percent afterwards. But using a parallel definition of "pro-conservative orientation," a much larger shift occurs and in a pro-conservative direction at the national level. The paper changed from being virtually neutral [.1 percent pro-liberal] to a 33 percent pro-conservative line. Since more than twice as many features focus on the federal government than on the province (and this federal focus itself greatly increased after the ownership change), the comparative magnitude of this pro-conservative shift was even greater. Critics' predictions that chains' influence will likely be greatest in respect to national orientations seem borne out by this huge increase in pro-conservative national features. Thus, reexamination of the data easily supports conclusions about chain ownership quite discordant with the author's claims.

Finally, one of the seven articles cited for the proposition that chain ownership is beneficial actually provides some evidence that chains operate better papers. In a study of 100 daily newspapers in New England,³³ Lee Becker, Randy Beam and John Russial conclude that "[d]espite the high value assigned to independent ownership," their data "suggests it is misplaced."³⁴ They used four performance measures (news existence, news evaluation, news presentation, and editorial page) in coding short evaluative essays about these papers, written for another purpose by thirteen journalists and former journalists. These "quality" measures included notions of breadth of coverage, balance of news treatment, and editorial balance as well as possibly less "ideological" norms such as quality of writing, display, layout, etc. The authors' claim concerning the merits of chain ownership was based on an overall quality index. They pointed out, however, that in constructing its overall quality index, editorial page quality was the least correlated with the other quality measures. This suggests two points: first, papers with good editorial pages often have poorly rated news sections and vice versa; and second, that

the authors' finding of a correlation between chain ownership and their measure of quality did not necessarily apply to their measure of editorial page quality.

Without casting doubts on this study's value, I note three reservations about its performance measures. First, the need for standardized evaluations may have led to reliance on measures of good performance that are easily identified by the media professionals who acted as evaluators and that are even more highlighted by the standardized coding procedure of this secondary study. A point score for a good layout score is more easily generated than is an evaluation of whether the long story about a local problem usefully contributed to the local political environment. Good technical quality in graphics is more easily identified than political salience of graphics. These comparatively routinizable qualities are likely to be precisely the qualities that a chain is best positioned to impose from above. In other words, the methodology may be biased to highlight qualities most susceptible to improvement by a chain owner while being comparatively blind to precisely the qualities where chain's practices may be objectionable.³⁵

Second, some of the study's measures of quality are contestable and somewhat ideological. For example, balance certainly, and scope of coverage probably, correspond to current conceptions of good journalism³⁶ and good marketing.³⁷ Note, however, that these standards would give low rankings, for instance, to crusading "outliers" or papers offering real diversity. Nonetheless, historically, communities have often been well served by a focused, partisan, crusading paper.

Finally, independent ownership may serve editorial quality — a correlation found in studies noted below and apparently consistent with the New England data. If chains turn out to be better in relation to some aspects of news presentation (for example, graphics) and independents provide better editorial quality, choosing between beneficial effects becomes debatable. Thus, although the New England study suggests potential merit in chain ownership, aspects of the study's criteria for and operationalization of merit may unintentionally bias the analysis in favor of chains.

In sum, Busterna's literature review offered seven studies as purportedly showing chain owned papers to have positive qualities (in contrast to thirteen purportedly showing independent papers perform better). Although subject to competing interpretations, of these seven,

three (St. Divier's, Parson's, and Romanow's) in fact offer marginal support for the notion that independents are better. Three (Schweitzer's, Flatt's, and Pilegge's) offer no relevant data or argument on the issue. Only one actually supports the position for which it was cited. With articles like these as its friends, the affirmative case for chains — the case that supposedly balances or counters the many studies indicating problems with chains— seems weak indeed. Still, the real question is whether the balance of the available research provides points toward chain ownership mattering. Thus, the next section attempts a more systematic review of the available research literature.

II. Research Survey

Chain ownership is really a subtopic given my more general concern with the societal significance of media ownership. This subtopic is, however, the focus of the bulk of the published social science research on media ownership.³⁸ The research typically looks for differences between independent and chain owned papers, occasionally adding slightly more nuanced categories, such as public or private ownership, or distinguishing large and small chains or in-state (local) and out-of-state chains. The research most often compares chain and independent papers in respect to: (1) homogeneity, (2) emphasis on profitability (or differences in price), and (3) quality (or, sometimes, merely differences in content).

Roughly, the reasoning behind these three foci is: A democratic public requires quality papers while democratic values are enhanced by diversity, by having different voices. Any homogeneity that results from imposition rather than from independent professional judgement provides grounds to doubt professional quality and to fear appropriate diversity has been suppressed. Moreover, businesses inevitably have opportunities to trade-off quality for profits, but society benefits if the press takes the first option and produces better quality media products. Likewise, holding quality constant, the public is better-off the less it costs; in fact, support for democracy requires that the media be widely available and lower prices enhance availability.

Thus, differences in the three variables listed above presumably provide a basis to compare the ownership forms' contributions to democracy. Of course, the research's actual relevance will depend both on how it specifies its opera-

tional terms and on whether it produces findings — that is, the research and its results must be examined. That will be the concern of this section. I postpone until Part III casting doubt on this research matrix. There I will consider deeper questions, such as: Does this research focus on the right issues? Is it equipped to be informative in relation to those issues? To the extent the research exhibits problems, are they related merely to execution of the research strategy or are the problems tied more tightly to inadequacies of the underlying methodology?

A. Homogeneity

1. *The studies* Existing research suggests that chain-ownership has some homogenizing effects on content, although overt central control may seldom be the mechanism of influence.

An ideal press might be expected to have many different newspapers making independent judgements about the merits of political candidates. Given independence, the paper's judgements should vary. Of course, since some candidates will be better, variation in judgments will not be extreme; many independent judges will agree that "x" candidate is best. Thus, a relevant inquiry may be: do chains reduce independence, which could show up in their producing more homogeneity than do independents.

Two successive studies tried to provide evidence relating to this issue.³⁹ Combined, they examined homogeneity within chains in relation to Presidential endorsements in the eight elections from 1960 through 1988.⁴⁰ Defining homogeneity as at least 85 percent agreement among members of a chain making endorsements, this research found that chain ownership correlates with considerable homogeneity. In the first four elections, the proportion of chains that were internally homogeneous varied depending on the election from 91 percent (1972) to 64 percent (1964), while ranging from 38 percent to 73 percent from 1976 through 1988.

Unfortunately, the studies' statistical approach mars the significance of their findings. Neither study directly compared homogeneity among chain members with what could be expected from comparable sets of independent papers. Without such a comparison, no effect can be attributed to chain membership.

Important aspects of the reported results could be artifacts of the statistical model. On the basis of a finding that homogeneity was less common

in bigger chains, Celilie Gaziano in the second study concluded that "being bigger inhibits [restrictive editorial] control," at least in relation to presidential endorsements.⁴¹ This does not follow from the data. Given the study's definition of homogeneity, small chains should have greater homogeneity even if larger chains exercised equivalent (or somewhat more) restrictive control. Basically, the point is that the odds are better for flipping two heads in a row than three. For example, assume chains range in size from three to six papers and a societal context in which 80 percent of the papers make Republican and 20 percent make Democratic endorsements. (My general point can be extended, although with increased mathematical complexity, to a sample that contains larger chains.) Even if chain ownership had no influence, chance would predict that 52 percent of the three member chains but only 26 percent of the six member chains would be homogeneous.⁴² The "finding" that small chains tend to be more homogeneous need have nothing to do with greater influence exercised by small chains.

The above example also shows, given papers' tendency to favor Republicans, that chance would produce a substantial degree of homogeneity — a result reinforced by the generally greater number of small chains. Other findings may likewise reflect factors other than chain control. The finding that regional chains are more homogeneous than national chains⁴³ could reflect greater endorsement homogeneity generally among papers of a single region rather than the greater restrictive editorial control of regional chains. Likewise, a partial explanation for decreased homogeneity in the second time period may be the substantial increase in the average size of the chains studied. This only begins the methodological comments about these two studies. Nevertheless, in the end, these studies may still provide some support for the view that chains exercise "some" homogenizing influence.⁴⁴

In contrast, Ronald Wagenberg and Walter Soderlund claim that their "data suggest rather strongly that in the [Canadian] 1972 election, chain ownership does not seem to have resulted in any collusion by editorialists within the Free Press chain to stress any particular issue or promote the fortunes of any political party."⁴⁵ They then assert "[t]hat there was no uniformity of theme selection or partisanship amongst chain owned newspapers in the 1972 campaign..."⁴⁶ But even a cursory examination shows that any reliance on this study would be misplaced.

First, the methodology is entirely inadequate. The study compared homogeneity of themes in election-oriented editorials during the 1972 federal election in English language dailies owned by Free Press located in four major cities — Toronto, Ottawa, Winnipeg, and Vancouver — with a Halifax paper, a chain-owned Windsor paper, and a major French-language paper (*Le Devoir*) that the study treated as a control.⁴⁷ The sample seemed oddly idiosyncratic. The smallness of the sample means that virtually any finding could result by chance. The lack of randomness in selection makes results problematic. Moreover, chain ownership is not well distinguished from independent papers given the inclusion of a chain paper within the control. Any findings are likely to be artifacts of the particular papers examined or their geographical location.

Second, Wagenberg and Soderlund's interpretation of data is consistently questionable. For example, they assert that their table listing each paper's percentage of election editorials containing economic themes (subdivided by economic subject) shows that there is not "a persistent difference between [the Free Press chain papers] and the control group." But adding the percentage of editorials focusing on the four main economic themes listed in the table shows the four Free Press papers devoting 58.2 percent, 39.8 percent, 37.9 percent, and 26.2 percent [mean = 40.5 percent] while the three controls devote 31.3 percent (*Le Devoir*), 24.2 percent, and 16.0 percent [mean = 23.8 percent] of editorials to these topics.⁴⁸ This observation, and others, suggest chain influence, a picture quite at odds with the authors' readings of their data.

Much better designed than the Canadian study, Roya Akhavan-Majib, Anita Rife, and Sheila Gopinath found homogeneity in Gannett papers' editorial positions.⁴⁹ After observing that "Gannett has been the nation's most vocal chain in proclaiming its commitment to editorial autonomy for its group-owned newspapers," they showed that Gannett papers were more likely than other papers to editorialize on each of the three national issues examined ($p < .01$ to $.001$ depending of the issue). Moreover, as compared to other papers, Gannett papers were much more likely to be homogeneous in their position ($p < .05$ to $p < .01$ on the individual issues) as well as more likely consistently to oppose the conservative position ($p < .0001$).⁵⁰

Some mechanisms of chain influence may be structural. Theodore L. Glasser, David S. Allen and S. Elizabeth Blanks examined the promi-

nence or "play" given by papers to the story of presidential candidate Gary Hart's sexual affair, a story broken by the *Miami Herald*, a leading Knight-Ridder (K-R) paper.⁵¹ K-R papers gave the story greater play ($p < .05$) than did those non K-R papers that do not use the K-R wire, while non K-R papers that do use the K-R wire "scored" roughly half way between the other two categories (although this difference did not meet requirement of statistical significance).⁵² An obvious explanation relates to the chain papers' greater access to and greater respect for their chain's own wire. Thus, the authors argue that the evidence of chain influence implicates "an organization arrangement" that effectively impinges on editors' news judgement without necessarily causing the editor to experience a loss of autonomy.⁵³ In this account, the ownership effect "rarely manifests itself directly and overtly at the level of operational control in the newsroom; rather, it points to a kind of allocative pressure that can be at times resisted but seldom ignored."⁵⁴ Thus, this evidence does not "speak to a chain's commitment to local autonomy and press diversity, [but] it does call into question a chain's ability to meet that commitment."⁵⁵

2. *Discussion* Implicit in these studies is the assumption that chain-produced homogeneity is bad. Chains so clearly recognize this as a perceived evil that they almost universally express commitment to their papers' editorial page autonomy.⁵⁶ Knight-Ridder gruffly asserts: "We bought them. But we don't own them."⁵⁷ Likewise, in its industry-oriented advertising, Gannett consistently claims that it leaves each paper editorially independent.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, even if intuitively objectionable, the precise evil in homogeneity requires explanation.⁵⁹ Homogeneity reflects agreement, consensus, or insight. Often this is considered good. Consider the value placed on homogeneity — that is, unanimity — in jury decisions. John Stuart Mill, a major proponent of diversity, even suggested that "the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested."⁶⁰

Several objections to homogeneity are plausible. First, democracy is furthered by people having an effective opportunity to hear at least all "relevant" or reasonable sides in a free debate. Still, this concern applies only with difficulty to chain-produced homogeneity. A local paper's close resemblance to papers in distant towns does not lessen the diversity readily available to the paper's local readers.

Second, and more promising, a normative idea underlying the commitment to democracy, or to equality of citizenship, asserts the propriety of a wide sharing of the power to have a say in society. The capacity, whether or not exercised, of the few to control debate offends this value. On this view, both the more that voices are independent and the more that the independent voices are widely representative, the better. Third, the presence of many independent voices may provide a better "check" on corruption and abuse by the powerful. The hypothesis is that many critics, many observers, will make for a more effective watchdog.⁶¹ Fourth, society is diverse. Different groups, different locales, have different needs for information and opinion. Provision of information and opinion is surely more useful if it responds to its particular audience. Therefore, society is served not only by diversity in newspaper content but also by more local control of the content.⁶²

The four suggested objections are that chain-produced homogeneity may reflect chains' failure (1) to produce adequate diversity for democratic decision-making, (2) to disperse power widely, (3) to perform adequately as a watchdog, and (4) to respond to groups' diverse needs. These concerns relate less to homogeneity itself and more to the assumption that a chain's homogeneity indicates possible failures in relation to one or another of the press's social roles. Roughly, the implicit view is that the press's selection and development of news and opinion should represent the best independent judgments of the diverse people and diverse groups in society and, especially, in the local community. Going back to the jury analogy, unanimity is not bad but courts invalidate unanimous jury verdicts either if the jury selection systematically excludes members of some segment of society or if outside forces influence the jury. It is not homogeneity in chain-owned papers that is bad but homogeneity that is not produced by independent reflective judgements of agents who are themselves as diverse as is society. When stated this way, several critical limitations in the positivist empirical research on homogeneity are evident.

First, evidence of homogeneity may give reason for concern but absence of such evidence would not alleviate concern because homogeneity is only one form of evidence of lack of independence or lack of diversity. For example, centralized control might dictate different content in different markets but still not embody substantive diversity or dispersal of power nor generate aggressive critiques of abuse by the

powerful or content responsive to local needs.

Second, by its nature, the positivist account observes existing evidence of homogeneity. The chains' *potential* influence over content decisions is also a *present* evil.⁶³ A presently tolerant chain is no more acceptable from the perspective of concerns justifying the critique of homogeneity than a presently permissive slave owner. The issue is whether there are any conditions that cause a chain paper to be unable⁶⁴ or, under various possible future scenarios, to have no incentive to provide relevant diversity, resist centralized power, expose corrupt or incompetent exercises of power, or focus on media content needed by particular communities. None of the positivist accounts, however, produces information relevant to this crucial inquiry.

Third, the positivist studies require a comparison group to determine whether an ownership form correlates with and possibly produces particular effects — for example, whether chain ownership produces more homogeneity than "normal." If the comparison group also produces the investigated effects, the comparison would appear to absolve the chain while in fact an appropriate analysis would object to both chain ownership and the type of ownership exemplified by the control group.

Chains and independent papers might equally exhibit the same evils if they are largely controlled by people who, for class, racial, ethnic, or other reasons, have a relatively uniform perspective. For example, a 1975 report finds that the majority of all newspapers making presidential endorsements have favored the Republican candidate in each of the last twenty presidential elections except for Goldwater's 1964 effort.⁶⁵ Likewise, the watchdog function (third concern) and the dispersal of power (the second) are threatened if the class basis of ownership mutes exposés of class-based abuses or creates imbalances in societal sharing of cultural power. The analytic point is that if a study finds that chains do not increase homogeneity, a better interpretation might be to disparage independents rather than whitewash chains. Of course, if each of the two major current forms of ownership are equivalent, that could suggest that policy makers should not care which prevails. Even this conclusion, however, would be wrong. Rather, the issue should be to identify the form from which it would be easier to move toward a presently uncommon but more socially beneficial ownership form.

Despite these critiques of the limitations of

the research — limitations that mainly show that we could not be entirely reassured even if the studies found no evidence that chains produce homogeneity in their newspapers — the actual results of the studies should not be forgotten. Of the main six studies reviewed, the three best — the studies of Gannett, Knight-Ridder, and newspaper endorsements in the 1972 presidential election — all provide clear evidence that chain ownership has homogenizing effects. Although serious methodological problems detracted from the usefulness of the other three, and despite Wagenberg and Soderlund's contrary interpretation of their data on (Canadian) Free Press papers, these three also provide some evidence pointing toward troublesome homogenizing effects of chain ownership.

B. Profit Oriented

Editors and leading journalists continually proclaim that the commitment to journalistic values must not be sacrificed to profits. But they seldom observe that this commitment relates to structure. Like story telling, the journalistic tradition often emphasizes the individual case. Thus, most media leaders unsurprisingly stress that the proper emphasis on quality and the avoidance of mere profit seeking depends mostly on having a good person in charge, not on the ownership form.⁶⁶ (A policy analyst might accept this claim and then argue that policy conclusions should be based on the "tendency" of different "forms" to find good leaders. Still, it also seems possible that different ownership forms put different pressures on the leader, no matter who she is, such that the focus on good leaders must be seen as overly simplistic.⁶⁷) C. K. McClatchy, a respected former editor and chairman of a newspaper chain, illustrates a common sentiment in the profession when he argued: "the factor that seems to be essential for the making of a good newspaper is having individuals in charge who understand the special role newspapers play ... [G]ood newspapers are almost always run by good newspaper people; they are almost never run by good bankers or good accountants."⁶⁸ Then, in a small move toward a more structural analysis, McClatchy indicated his greatest fear was that newspapers might be run by conglomerates, such as Mobil, that show contempt for the press.⁶⁹

In contrast to commentators coming from a journalism career, social scientists commonly investigate whether the ownership form affects the enterprise's degree of profit-orientation —

and that is the research that this section will examine. Interestingly, like the journalists, the social scientists quite clearly and often unreflectively assume that the less central the profit-orientation the better.

Some observers would find this assumption curious. The simplistic economic model implicit in many recent calls for deregulation or increased economic privatization adopts the opposite assumption — that a market-orientation benefits the consumer. The market devotee generally expects concerns for profits and for desirable levels of quality to merge. Moreover, competition severely limits opportunities to choose one over the other.⁷⁰ The visible benefit of the invisible hand is supposed to be better products at a lower price.

Nevertheless, both journalism professionals and the social science researchers examined here apparently believe that market discipline is neither desirable nor effective. Their implicit assumptions are that media enterprises can choose either to devote "discretionary" resources and efforts toward quality and public service or toward greater profits; and that journalists' professional ideals (and the good of society) require the first alternative to dominate but corruption by the second is a constant danger.⁷¹ Even the economists might agree that if the industry is monopolistic, newspapers could either extract monopoly profits or "spend" those profits on quality. And, of course, some degree of local monopoly or at least monopolistic competition usually characterizes most newspaper markets. Alternatively, even absent monopoly, peculiar features of the newspaper or media market may leave newspaper enterprises room for choice in respect to their commitment to quality.

1. *The Studies* The researcher's implicit two-part thesis is that the form of ownership may affect the degree of profit-orientation and that profit-orientation matters (negatively). A test requires both a method to identify papers comparatively more focused on profits⁷² and a method to determine whether this orientation actually results in worse media. Actual profitability shows neither that a choice has been made to maximize profitability or that the result has been bad. Former journalists or editors offer impressionistic tales, but it is this folk wisdom that the researcher typically tries to test. Thus, researchers, particularly those using statistical or "objective" material, face difficulties in identifying relevant information.

Several studies rely on editors' self-reports of

their behavioral or value orientations. Even assuming honesty, this is hazardous. Ownership could affect behavior relating to the trade-off between profits and quality without editors and publishers' awareness of the influence or of the behavior's consequences. Two groups might equally believe their choices represent commitments to quality while one group is actually unconsciously rationalizing profit-oriented behavior. For example, an editor might justify either partisan or objective reporting on "quality" grounds. Even if profit concerns originally stimulated development of the ruling journalistic norm of "objectivity," its subsequent thorough rationalization on public service grounds allows editors now to describe it as representing a commitment to quality.⁷³ If a chain paper was more committed to objectivity, the determinative factor may be economic but the explanation would surely be journalistic. Likewise, structural contexts could affect the incentives on how to report behavior. Two groups whose behavior is similar might report it differently. For example, owner-editors might have a self-image reason to see themselves as honorably engaged in public service while ambitious employee-editors might need to see themselves as effective generators of profits — even if the behavior of the two groups were the same. In any event, self reports must be somewhat suspect.

In several studies, David Pearce Demers finds that chain editors are more likely than non-chain editors to report that "profits" drive their organizations.⁷⁴ In contrast, in an analysis of small, mostly weekly, papers in Minnesota, C. N. Olien finds that editors of the corporately-owned papers associated profits with job satisfaction less than did their counterparts in independently-owned papers.⁷⁵ But this result might reflect the interaction of a tendency in small independent papers to combine the roles of editor and publisher with a tendency for publishers, who have responsibility for survival of the enterprise, to find business success rewarding. Thus, the corporate papers' division of roles may decrease the personal salience of profits for the editor.⁷⁶ If so, the corporately-owned paper may still be more profit-oriented.

The above explanation illustrates the methodological problem noted earlier in using questionnaire data. Different ownership structures may create different dimensions to or different combinations of roles. Honest responses to questions about orientations are as likely to disclose the role occupants' understandings of role-appropriate attitudes as they are to indicate

the effect of different ownership structures on enterprise practice — but the real concern is presumably the second, ownership's effect on practice. Thus, although the above studies provide information, indicating people's characterization of either their role or institution, any interpretation must be cautious. Leaders self-deceived about the motivations and significance of their behavior would certainly not be a new phenomenon.

According to John Busterna, since owner-managers get to pocket the profits, standard economic theory predicts that they will be the more profit-oriented. Non-owner-managers, particularly in monopoly situations, will sacrifice some profits in order to achieve other personal goals or gratifications. These economic predictions did not pan out. Busterna's study of thirty-seven managers of weeklies or small dailies, fourteen of whom had no ownership interest and twenty-three who owned 50 percent or more of their paper, found the non-owner-managers to favor profits over other goals more than owner-managers ($p < .01$).⁷⁷ Thus, the data "support the notion that local newspaper owners may be in the business to achieve other goals besides maximizing profits."⁷⁸ Although this study relates merely to role combination, not chain ownership, its findings support the policy view that chain ownership should be disfavored on the ground that its editors will be more inclined than owner-managers to sacrifice other values to the pursuit of profit.

William Blankenburg and Gary Ozanich obtain results parallel to Busterna's. They note that economists commonly suggest that owner/managers will be more oriented toward profit maximization than managers who are separated from ownership, at least assuming ineffective monitoring by owners.⁷⁹ The economists' corresponding prediction is that owner-managed papers will be more profitable. But the common view within the journalism profession is the opposite — namely, that owner-managers will be more dedicated to journalistic ideals even at the expense of profits. This journalistic view predicts that owner-managed papers will be, desirably, less profitable. Thus, if bottom-line orientation is associated with failing to serve the paper's societal functions, the economists would and the journalists would not expect separation of ownership and management (as is likely to occur with public as well as with chain ownership) to be desirable.

Testing the alternative hypotheses by looking at nine publicly held corporations and using

insider's percentage of share holding to stand for degree of owner-management, Blankenburg found that owner-managed-firms were less profitable. This contradicted the economists' view and supported the journalistic conception. Although the article did not focus on chain-ownership, its logic supports the thesis that independent ownership more reliably leads to the pursuit of values other than profit.

If practices that aim at increasing profits but that sacrifice some aspect of journalism's role as a public servant could be identified, research could more directly correlate ownership form with the trade-off between profits and journalistic performance. Another study by Blankenburg utilizes this strategy. Consumer demand for newspapers apparently is relatively inelastic at existing prices, suggesting that newspaper firms might increase profits merely by raising price. To the extent that advertisers value some readers (for example, more affluent potential consumers) much more than others, if a paper could raise prices without losing those readers (and even better if it shed, by whatever means, readers not so valued), it might significantly increase profits.

Relying on this interpretation of newspapers' economic options, William Blankenburg hypothesized that "[t]he publisher most likely to constrain circulation is one who has a strong motive, considerable information and market power" — that is, a large, publicly-owned chain whose dailies are local monopolies — while "[a] closely held firm may forego some profit" in favor of other goals.⁸⁰ Blankenburg examined one chain, Gannett, between 1969 and 1979. Gannett's profits skyrocketed during this period and the chain's head, Allen Neuharth, was consistently named the industry's "most outstanding chief executive" of the year.⁸¹ Thus, except for Blankenburg's thesis, it might be surprising that Gannett papers did worse ($p < .05$) in respect to circulation than did comparable dailies.⁸² Blankenburg concludes that his study shows corporate-chains' profit-oriented influence on circulation — a result he criticizes. Noting that "circulation policy is a form of editorial policy," Blankenburg argues that "withheld circulation is akin to suppressed information"; even if profitable, this profit-maximizing practice is inconsistent with the status of the "expelled subscribers" as citizens.⁸³

Of course, one example does not prove the rule. Still, the Gannett study illustrates the possibility of finding evidence of exploiting profit opportunities at the expense of public trust responsibilities without reliance on subjective

self-reports. Equally important, it supports the thesis that the economics of the industry leaves enterprises considerable discretion as to how to balance pursuit of profits and public service.

2. Discussion The studies (Demers; Demers & Wackman; Busterna; Blankenburg) support the hypothesis that chain ownership intensifies a paper's profit orientation. The one piece of counter evidence was that the editors of small independent Minnesota papers were more likely than their apparent counterparts at corporately-owned papers to report associating job satisfaction with profitability.⁸⁴ But rather than a greater profit orientation of independently owned papers, this may merely reflect the different role positions of the responders — e.g., that a struggling publisher is more likely to focus on profits than is an editor, and the editor is more likely also to be the publisher at the independent.

The most interesting aspect of these studies is, however, their underlying assumptions: (a) that the profit objective competes with the goals of quality or journalistic service; and (b) that the market leaves enterprises a choice to emphasize one or the other goal. These assumptions are crucial. For example, without them, Blankenburg's finding that owner/manager papers were less profitable would suggest a demerit of such ownership. In contrast to these assumptions, many economists assume that in most business contexts a profit orientation leads to an efficient and, thus, socially desirable use of resources. Moreover, even if pursuit of profit were undesirable, many economists would hypothesize that market competition virtually forces this profit orientation on economic entities, leaving neither chains nor independents freedom to choose to pursue other values. James Rosse, probably the most prominent newspaper economist writing in the 1970s, argued that competition severely limits the press's capacity to be socially responsible.⁸⁵ Economics, however, also provides at least one explanation for why the assumptions underlying the research reviewed here could be true. To the extent that the local monopoly dailies have monopoly economic power, these papers would have the choice of how to spend (potential) monopolistic profits. They could sacrifice some profits in favor of greater dedication to journalistic values (or, of course, in favor of some other values).

In any event, the logic of the research seems to be that, given conflicts between profit and service and given the possibility to choose between them, it matters whether chain papers

choose differently than independents. But why does it matter? Presumably for policy reasons, especially those related to democratic theory. But if that is the rationale, these investigations are much narrower than their logic suggests. Instead, given the underlying assumptions, the implicit policy rationale of the studies calls for at least three further lines of investigation.

First, the confirmed free marketeer should investigate whether any changes in the economic structure would reduce the tension between a profit-orientation and the public interest. In an earlier work on advertising, for example, I recommended a tax on advertising, with the tax revenue used to provide a subsidy based on circulation revenue. This tax and subsidy program would increase newspapers' market incentive to respond to readers and decrease its tendency to mold content and circulation around the values of advertisers, thereby improving newspaper's democratic role.⁸⁶

Since the present scenario is based precisely on the desirability that newspapers ignore the market incentives and instead choose to spend money (e.g., potential monopoly profits) on journalistic service, it is difficult to imagine how a changed market structure would itself create incentives to reject the economic motivation. Possibly the best that could be done is to establish mechanisms that reward individuals in control for journalistic rather than profit performance. Journalistic awards, for example, may play this role. Such mechanisms, however, seem less a restructuring of the market to create a preferable incentive structure than a reduction of the market's role.

Second, if profit-orientation and performance of democratic functions conflict, the policy analyst should explore and evaluate ways in which the media (or significant portions of it) could be removed from the market realm. Currently developing "radical democratic" media theory often argues that some combination of market and non-market entities may avoid the evils of both market and government domination while retaining the positive elements of both market responsiveness and public service production.⁸⁷

Third, and possibly less radically, the assumption that the market leaves newspapers considerable discretion invites investigation of ways to encourage the forms of media ownership most likely to use their discretion to emphasize democratic or public service journalistic commitments. This is the one policy issue to which

the research examined here relates but, for this purpose, the research's focus on the difference between chains and independents is too narrow. The research does suggest that independents are less likely to sacrifice quality or public trust responsibilities to profit maximization. Still, on average chain managers and independent owners are likely to be too similar and too profit oriented to give confidence that either will routinely choose quality and public service over profits. Research should investigate whether other ownership forms, for example, papers held in trust by foundations, or papers where journalists have a greater say, would be more oriented toward proper journalistic values. And, if so, whether law presently limits, and whether legal changes could encourage, the creation and vitality of these forms.

Thus, arguably the most interesting aspect of these studies is not their findings but their implicit assumptions concerning the open possibilities left for media entities. And arguably their most troubling aspect is that any serious grappling with the implications of these assumptions requires that the research inquiry not stop, as the social science research appears to stop,⁸⁸ at the question of whether chains differ from independents. Both are likely to be worse than possible alternatives that researchers should examine.

C. Quality.

In addition to management-level employees' reported commitment to quality in comparison to commitments to profits, a criterion examined in the last section, two main approaches to identifying newspaper quality are used in research related to chain ownership.⁸⁹ Each approach arguably exhibits conservative, positivist interpretations of the concept of quality. First are "indirect" measurements that rely on relatively "objective" factors, for example, factors that characterize the inputs or outputs of media production. Second are more direct, and implicitly more subjective, evaluations of content quality. For instance, attributes like editorial vigor are said to be good and then, with considerable cross-coder reliability, are measured in different papers.

1. *Objective Factors* If certain inputs or outputs predictably relate to quality, a researcher could use their presence to compare chain and independent papers. For example, perhaps devoting a plentitude of resources to producing

content predictably makes for a better paper. Such analyses have the advantage of avoiding the ideologically-loaded task of determining what newspapers should be doing.⁹⁰

In a typical study, John Busterna, Kathleen Hansen and Jean Ward looked at all papers with circulation over 100,000, using six measures of content input: the number of full-time news staff, subscriptions to wire service, full-time library staff, library staff with library degrees, subscriptions to electronic databases, and monthly database search costs.⁹¹ Although finding chain ownership negatively associated with staff inputs and positively correlated with material resource inputs, the authors avoided the need to determine which was more important. Instead, they concluded that the small differences did not justify the view that chain ownership has a significant impact.⁹²

An excellent study by Gerald Grotta examined quality in terms of one input, number of editorial employees, and four positively-valued outputs, size of newshole, proportion of local to total news, size of editorial page newshole, and proportion of local to total editorial content.⁹³ Grotta's objective was to check industry claims that ownership concentration in the local daily newspaper industry benefits consumers.⁹⁴ He focused primarily on competition, concluding that ending competition resulted in no benefits for consumers (or advertisers) and arguably made them worse off. As for chain ownership, he merely reported that it did not produce a (statistically) "significant" difference.⁹⁵

Using a similar methodology, Stephen Lacy and Frederick Fico likewise found no significant differences between chain-owned and independent papers, although variations between different chains was tremendous.⁹⁶ And a fourth quantitative study found that chain and independent papers had no "statistically significant differences" in respect to newshole size or newshole as a proportion of the paper.⁹⁷

It is tempting to interpret these research reports as showing that chain ownership does not matter.⁹⁸ But just as plausible are two alternative interpretations. Possibly the studies used criteria that did not identify the relevant aspects in which the papers' quality differed. Or, even if the research used the most relevant criteria, the statistical analysis shows merely that the hypothesis of "no difference" cannot be rejected with an adequate degree of certainty (but, of course, the hypothesis of "difference" also cannot be rejected). That is, the study's only claim is that a person cannot be 95 percent

certain that ownership does matter. In fact, using the size of chain (with an independent paper treated as a chain of 1) as the independent variable, Barry R. Litman and Janet Bridges' study of 101 mostly large metropolitan papers found that chain size had a statistically significant negative impact on the total size of newshole ($p < .05$ for one tail test) and on staff size ($p < .10$ for 1 tail test).⁹⁹ This provides some evidence that chains — and especially larger chains — cut expenditures on news.

The results, of course, can vary depending on what is examined. One quantitative study found that chain ownership had a favorable effect. After first noting that color and graphics are liked by the public, increases their reading, and increases circulation and ad revenue, Keith Kenney and Stephen Lacy reported that chain ownership accounted for 4.5 percent of the variance in the quantity of front page-graphics ($p = .02$).¹⁰⁰ Thus, the one finding of a beneficial effect of chain ownership is a "slight" "positive" effect on front page graphics.

2. Content Evaluations Investigators could directly evaluate the quality of newspaper content. The secondary analysis of evaluations (written for a different investigation) of New England dailies, described earlier,¹⁰¹ found quality associated with chain ownership — although I noted various methodological questions about the study. In contrast, most research, focusing on particular aspects of quality, has found ways in which independents appear superior.

First, although admittedly using a sample too small and a methodology too ad hoc to support sound generalizations, Gerard Borstel nevertheless offered a suggestive report. Small independents apparently have more local comment, which Borstel interpreted as a commitment to the home community, than comparable chain-owned dailies.¹⁰² In a more methodologically sophisticated study, George Donohue, Clarice Olien and Phillip Tichenor implicitly argued that newspaper reporting of conflict is desirable, asserting that such reporting "is basic to all forms of public controversy" and an appropriate response to society's increasing structural pluralism.¹⁰³ Their examination of twenty small Minnesota dailies in 1979, found that in-state-owned papers (chain or independent) reported much more local conflict and three times as much local governmental conflict than out-of-state chain-owned papers. Fourteen years earlier, the situation had been dramatically different. At that time all but one of the papers was owned in-state. The now out-of-state chain papers then

reported conflict to a degree quite similar to the other papers.¹⁰⁴ The change to ownership by an out-of-state chain was clearly associated with a decline in this measure of quality.

Finally, chain ownership of West Coast dailies, stratified for size, corresponded to reduced editorial vigor.¹⁰⁵ Two groups of papers (those that were independent in 1960 but owned by a chain by 1975 and those that were independent in both periods) did not significantly differ in 1960. After sale to a chain (at least three years before the second evaluation), chain-owned papers differed ($p < .05$) from independents in having a smaller proportion of editorials that (1) were argumentative on controversial matters; (2) were argumentative on local matters; and (3) dealt with local controversial local matters.¹⁰⁶ The direction of change of independents over the period was toward more "vigor" on each measure in contrast to the reduced vigor of papers purchased by chains.

3. *Discussion* These studies do provide information. To their credit, chain papers have a few more front-page graphics and appear slightly more likely to purchase inputs from outside the enterprise, although independents are somewhat more likely to pay for internal staff inputs. Using a limited methodology, the New England newspaper study found chain ownership associated with its measure of quality. Arguably most important, several studies indicate that independents provide stronger editorial leadership. Still, a likely reaction to these studies is a sense that they failed to meaningfully explore quality. This failure, I think, reflects two methodological problems: the crudeness of the measurement tools and the attempt to transform a concept that is, in its most crucial aspects, properly non-neutral and ideological into a relatively neutral or "objective" standard.

First, consider insensitive tools. The underlying assumption that more inputs leads to quality gains plausibility if everything is viewed in commodity terms — won't the more expensive production be better? But most people really believe that more significant is the use to which paper puts the resources.¹⁰⁷ In his study of newspaper economics, W.B. Reddaway observed that "[t]he typical [London] popular newspaper spends three times as much as the typical quality [paper] [on editorial expenditures]."¹⁰⁸ Many readers of, say, the *Times* of London apparently find this information about inputs inadequate to show that their paper is inferior in quality to the typical English tabloid.

Statistical quantitative *output* measures are

equally flawed as indices of "quality." Consider, for example, quality from one key perspective from which democracies value the press, its performance of the "checking function."¹⁰⁹ This watchdog role can be present both in constant daily questioning of government performance or, more occasionally but more dramatically, in investigative reporting that uncovers scandal and corruption. Quality in this performance inevitably depends in part on chance factors. Also relevant will be the paper's capacity and inclination to devote the necessary resources to finding abuse of power. Probably most crucial will be its judgement and its "courage" (or should the word be "incentive"?) to expose the abuse, perhaps even to "campaign" to make the exposé politically effective. Quantitative studies of randomly selected weeks cannot be expected adequately to identify the better papers because the key performances are likely to be rare. In fact, the "watchdog's" reputation for ferocity may deter abuse and lead to better government performance, resulting in less exposés for the research to count. Thus, not only would the positivist research most likely not identify this crucial category of content, but even if it did, possible dynamic effects of effective performance would not be observed, making the resulting quantitative information uninformative.

The second, more basic problem with such quantitative studies is their blindness to the ideological nature of quality. All conceptions of quality represent ideologically disputed, contestable values. Moreover, the relevant priorities concerning newspaper quality, hence the appropriate basis of judgement, will inevitably be contextual. The New England study identified quality with measures like balance and scope of coverage. While these measures correspond to currently dominant conceptions of good journalism and good marketing, they often support an inherently centrist, usually demobilizing status quo bias. Opposing conceptions of journalistic standards have great merit — merit that varies with context.

Consider quality rankings of three hypothetical papers that might have existed in the 1840s: (1) a "penny paper" that emphasized crime, scandal, and news — but tended toward balance; (2) a well-financed local Southern paper that provided considerable local news but consistently framed this news from the partisan perspective of defending the "peculiar institution"; (3) and the *I. F. Stone Weekly* of the 1840s — an underfinanced, skillfully written, crusading abolitionist paper that emphasized national news

and politics as well as anything related to slavery, with everything consistently presented from an anti-slavery "opinionated" perspective (and whose circulation roughly equalled the second paper). All quality measures used in the research examined here are likely to rank the abolitionist paper lowest even if it were the "best" written according to rhetoricians, even if it were the most politically consequential, and even if it were the paper most valued by its readers. Although admittedly contestable, a contrasting view would measure quality by the extent to which the paper serves the community and serves human, democratic values. On this criterion, even if the abolitionist paper did not rank so high on these factors (writing style; consequential, valued by readers), it should rank highest.¹⁰ Surely, the methodology that leads to ranking this paper lowest is neither adequate nor non-ideological.

Qualitative concerns with serving a democratic social order, not just pleasing readers, is likely behind the favorable ratings given to local news and opinion, to reporting of conflict, and to editorial vigor. But these comparatively "objective" criteria are still too "neutral." What media critics appropriately want is for papers to get it "right," that is to provide content that serves people's fulfillment and their self-determination; for papers to take the "right" political positions, or at least to be heavily and honestly involved in the dialogue most likely to lead people and society toward wise or desirable conclusions. And they appropriately want papers to be effective, to have an impact, or more specifically, a good impact.

Thus, it is not enough that before the Civil War the Southern paper emphasized conflict, reported on local matters, like how to keep slaves in line, or employed lots of journalistic inputs. What the media critic should want is an effective abolitionist press. (Of course, that judgement about "quality" does not mean government should be trusted either to identify quality or to mandate it — the proper role of government is a logically and practically separate question.) Likewise, media critics have strong, value-based, but neither uniform nor uncontested views about what getting it right would mean today. These strongly partisan views are, however, out of place in social science as it is widely understood. As long as this is so, however, social sciences' effort to identify quality or to associate it with other features like independent or chain ownership will be severely limited in its ability to provide relevant insight. General

agreement may exist about some aspects of quality that researchers can identify relatively "objectively." However, methodology substitutes for and distorts judgement if evaluations (or policy analyses) look only to measurements of non-controversial features.

III. Research Inadequacies — Need for Different Directions

Most reviews of research on chain ownership assert that the findings show no discernible, adverse effects. This is wrong. There are, of course, many non-findings — that is, given the study's data, there is a lack of statistically relevant differences on the dimension examined. This is, however, non-evidence. All it means is that the research did not observe a sufficiently large or consistent effect in respect to some particular feature of the newspapers. This non-finding says nothing about whether significant negative effects exist — and should not in any way be balanced against or counted with affirmative findings.¹¹

Grant the studies' implicit assumptions that homogeneity or lack of independence is objectionable; that an emphasis on profits, especially an emphasis on profits over public service or journalistic values, is bad. Then, the research provided evidence that chain ownership is bad — it was associated with each evil. Independent ownership also correlated with arguably the most important aspects of quality examined — editorial vigor and reporting on conflict. Nevertheless, despite findings that show negative effects of chain ownership, I suspect few readers will conclude that this research indicates a serious problem in the existing trend toward chain ownership. Many will conclude that given the picture of the world provided by this research, the need for reform is minimal.

After researchers' incredible quantity of work in producing these studies — some of which represented thoughtful approaches that produced useful findings — if the overall conclusion is that, even after showing the evils hypothesized, the implications are nil, one might wonder whether the research paradigm has been misguided and needs, at least in part, to be replaced with other forms of inquiry. Arguably, the research's minimal pertinence for reform is symptomatic of inherently conservative aspects of a methodology that attempts to examine statistically measurable facts that presently exist. Real practical or policy concerns, each of

which this research ignored or obscured, relate to: (1) a paper's more occasional deeds; (2) "real" quality; (3) different ownership forms' potential for good or bad transformations; and (4) ownership forms other than chains and independents.

1. *Occasional deeds* Statistical treatments pick out regularly reoccurring qualities. A sample constructed "week" may illustrate a paper's normal or typical presentation. However, from some perspectives, for example, the watchdog perspective, the most important "fact" about media entities may lie in their occasional "deeds" — both negative and positive. Crucial is how a paper responds to unique opportunities or folds in the face of intense pressures. For example, a paper ought to uncover, present, and possibly crusade about corruption — although this reporting may not occur frequently, say, in the sample week. Moreover, the quantity of such reports may be less significant than their "quality." Even if on a daily basis the *Washington Post* was worse in some respects than a comparative paper, if the *Post* is more likely to bring us Watergate, or if the otherwise slightly worse of two Detroit papers is more likely to report major corruption in Michigan government or in the automotive industry, the *Post* and this otherwise worse Detroit daily arguably are the better papers. On the negative side, commentators properly condemn a paper even if it only occasionally kills, for "corrupt" non-journalistic reasons, a politically or economically important story.

On average, chains might be hypothesized to be worse in these dimensions. The independent owner committed to her community might be predicted to engage in the occasional campaign or, viewing her integrity at stake, to stand up to pressure, both at the cost to profit, while the corporate chain might more often make profit determinative at these points.

If this hypothesis proved true, its significance would swamp in importance virtually all the statistical findings in the reported research. However, this hypothesis that chains will perform less well in respect to occasional but especially significant exposés or in respect to avoiding journalistic corruption is not subject to easy statistical investigation. Not only are major exposés not routine, and thus will not show up regularly in the material that the researcher examines, evaluating newspaper performance is made more difficult because it depends on comparative assessments of the effort required for and the importance of the "deed."¹² Stories buried for non-journalistic reasons are even less

suitable for positivist statistical analysis. These non-stories will not show up in content analyses.¹³ Self-reports of editors or publishers might provide statistically analyzable evidence. Still, not only will these individuals be loath to correctly report their own beliefs, but also they often will not have complete information; most important, their integrity will cause them to rationalize even to themselves the information that they do have.

Possibly the dimension in which independents are most commonly hypothesized to be preferable to chains is their comparative likelihood of nourishing the capacity and will-power to produce the occasional, crucial exposé, or the likelihood of avoiding journalistic corruption due to improper pressure to bury stories. If so, arguably the research has been looking for the wrong things. But a statistically-based methodology is ill-equipped to get at the occasional deed. Still, tendencies to perform well in this dimension of occasional deeds may correlate with good everyday journalism. The next consideration, therefore, is whether the research is well equipped to measure daily performance.

2. *Real Quality* Conceptions of quality vary. For example, is the quality press the one that best pleases consumers (as many preference-fulfilling economists might suggest, thereby justifying the positive assessment of front-page graphics)? Or is it the watchdog press, which differs from the sensationalist press in that its exposés will be less a staple and will more consistently concern abuse of power? Or is it the press that effectively mobilizes a widespread cultural and political activism aimed at creating a better, more egalitarian community? And if quality encompasses several dimensions — the one listed here or others — differing dimensions will vary in importance, will vary in the extent their importance is contested, and these variations will be contextual.

Most research examined here favored variables that were in some sense "objective" — e.g. reporters hired, wire services purchased, inches of local news, portion of space devoted to local news, circulation, endorsements, or scalable survey information such as reported emphasis on profits. These variables have the common attribute of being quantitatively measurable. They also may initially seem to be comparatively value-neutral. At one level, this apparent value neutrality is obviously false — the importance of a variable must reflect values. Still, few would question the merit of hiring more reporters — although it could be questioned. Perhaps a

common national discourse depends on the local paper using less not more of its own reporters. Nevertheless, the chosen criteria focus on elements about which the researcher reasonably expects the least controversy. Equally important, any controversy about these criteria is likely to cross partisan lines. For example, this "value neutral" impulse might be expected to measure and implicitly to value reporting of conflict but not to measure reporting judged to serve reformist or underclass rather than elite interests. Nevertheless, most of us "know" that it matters whether a Southern, pre-Civil War paper was abolitionist or a defender of slavery — and that it matters more than which used 5 percent more front-page graphics. The better "industrial structure" is surely the one in which the abolitionist paper was more likely to exist — for example, the social scientist could ask whether the abolitionist paper would have more likely been chain or family owned?

Rationalization of the value-neutral impulse on the ground that the researcher merely provides the information and that evaluation is for the policy analyst does not work. The information needed is which type of ownership is most likely to produce, for example, the abolitionist paper. "Value-neutral" information that the papers are equally likely to report conflict or use graphics¹⁴ is simply uninformative — or if taken, as there is a tendency illustrated in the research summaries to take it, to say that the papers do not appear to differ, the "value-neutral" information becomes affirmatively misleading.

Better information does not result from investigating the effect of ownership on only the more quantifiable or the less controversial, less partisan aspects of quality. That sort of investigation shows one part of the picture, which may be neither the most important part nor the part for which the form of ownership matters. Attempts to be "neutral" causes a loss of information. Quality is no more (or less) objective than values. Although obviously many conservatives should contest this view and substitute different aspects of content, it makes sense to conclude that quality is less at stake in relation to front-page graphics than in relation to whether the paper was an early supporter for civil rights or a consistent and effective critic of the Vietnam War. Research would be very informative if it showed that these positions were (positively or negatively) correlated with chain ownership.

Given that quality concerns such as those noted above are crucial, it is fanciful to expect that the social science methodology reviewed

here will prove adequate. First, the research predictably examines aspects of quality that are most easily operationalized for statistical treatment. Unless these aspects are normatively the most important or can be expected to correlate with those that are, the research is incomplete and can be misleading. It may showcase "evidence" that one form of ownership is better when precisely the opposite is true. The problem intensifies if the more measurable aspects of quality correlate more with one ownership form and the more important correlate with another. Chains, for example, might misleadingly appear acceptable if they correlate well with objective aspects of quality but not with less measurable aspects. (This point is similar to a possibility suggested by the study of New England daily papers, where editorial vigor seemed least correlated with other, arguably more objective features.¹⁵)

Second, even if the more significant conceptions of quality were operationalized, a value judgment must be made whether the more important concern is that a few papers are superb (in this respect) or that the average performance is high. Although not methodologically required, research tends to emphasize the second. If chains tend toward a leveled mediocrity, this emphasis would bias the reported conclusions in favor of chains. Third, and even more troublesome for the typical statistical analysis, criteria of quality are not only contested, they are also likely to be contextual. At some times or in some places, the community needs a newspaper that provides excellence in one way and, at another time or place, a different way. This form of contextual variability in needs could influence the type of knowledge relevant for evaluating ownership. For example, knowing something about different ownership forms' adaptability and their operative incentive structure could be most informative. Gathering this information requires, however, institutional analyses quite different from the statistical treatments that pervade the literature.

3. *Too Static* Possibly the greatest fear relating to chain ownership concerns future performance. What happens as time passes, as conditions change? Even if chains and independents presently produce equivalent products and are equally committed to quality, the fear is that changed economic or competitive circumstances will increase the pressure or create the opportunity to go for the buck and, at that time, chains are more likely to succumb. Or the fear is that under these future conditions, chains are more

likely to sacrifice valuable aspects of diversity (or promote dysfunctional diversity). Or the fear may be that during periods of national crisis or intensified class conflict, chains will exercise less independence or maturity of judgement. Or that chain's entanglement with an increasingly small elite will make future corruption of journalistic performance more likely.

Similarly, a plausible view is that existing media do not now properly serve society — they leave most of the population uninformed and apathetic. If chains and independents now perform equally (that is, equally badly) in this dimension, possibly the single most important "fact" about existing media is the likelihood that they will be, and the ease with which they could be, transformed into media entities that better serve society.

Ability to evaluate differences between chains or independents in regard to future transformations requires theories, probably of considerable contextual specificity, of institutional structure, normative theories identifying what would be better or worse than what we presently have, and historical predictions concerning the future contexts in which opportunities for change will occur.¹¹⁶

Statistical analysis of existing "facts" obviously provide evidence of existing patterns. By making the right comparisons, the statistical analysis might even provide support for causal explanations of how those patterns arose. Such analyses, however, are relatively ill-suited to predict or explain change in new directions. Of course, a theory of change might specify variables that bode well or poorly for future transformations. Social scientists can then search for the presence or absence of these variables in existing entities. At best, however, the research can test a theory of change against past events. Nothing guarantees that this form of validation will accurately predict future applicability. Moreover, the form of ownership that most easily leads to favorable transformations depends on what transformations are considered most desirable. For example, chain papers might more easily integrate electronic delivery of content. In contrast, independent ownership might provide the better starting point for change toward a media environment in which more diverse ownership forms are prominent, or in which media professionals have a larger and more egalitarian decision-making role, such that more diverse needs are served.

Without both a value-based conception of what is desirable and a theory of institutional

structure that identifies features of existing entities that relate to their potential for being corrupted or progressively transformed, a statistical methodology of "counting" things that "exist" is seriously limited. Other methodologies are necessary for providing information relevant to future transformations, a central "quality" issue.

4. Other Ownership Forms The research into newspaper ownership uniformly sought differences between chain and independent ownership (plus, occasionally, examining the effect of chain size or public stock ownership). Why? And why did it stop with this? Why not analyze additional ownership forms? And since the relevance of ownership presumably lies in owners' power of control, the real concern is probably the relevance of different forms of control. Thus, the research should, but did not, consider whether other aspects of the institution — for example, the structure of editorial control — also matter, possibly even more than ownership.

These observations suggest that the most appropriate rationale for the reported research implicitly warns that the research's focus is objectionably narrow. Here again, I suggest that this narrowness reflects, in part, research methodology.

A benign explanation for the research focus could be that the trend away from independent toward chain ownership is a major development in the modern newspaper industry. Surely, an adequate explanation of the research is the desire to understand what is happening. Alternatively, policy relevance might explain the focus. Any policy innovation must start from where we are, and the dominant existing institutional alternatives are chain and independent ownership. Neither explanation works.

A desire for understanding could explain a search for causes of change.¹¹⁷ But the research examined here was looking not for causes but rather for consequences. It compared the effect of two types of ownership. This comparison only makes sense under the hypothesis that something important is at stake — e.g., that the form of ownership matters for policy purposes. Once this policy concern is seen as implicit in the research agenda, the logic of the research cannot justify stopping short with an examination of only these two forms of ownership. Stopping here seems even more misguided since these chains and independents are predictably more alike than either is like a variety of other ownership forms that policy could easily favor. Stop-

ping short risks developing only information that implies that ownership differences do not matter although they do and risks ignoring the most policy relevant features of the phenomenon, ownership and control, purportedly investigated.

Of course, no researcher can examine everything. It is usually unfair to criticize any particular research project for what it did not do. Still, researchers inevitably set priorities. And these priorities inevitably exhibit biases. The danger of existing research's narrow scope is that its incompleteness and its systematically skewed findings will influence policy makers', activists', and other scholars' understanding. Not only insight and completeness but also the comparatively "objective" criterion of predictable theoretical fruitfulness (in contrast to methodological ease) suggest the need for a broader scope for the research. Insight requires a broader examination of ownership forms such as worker ownership, or non-profit foundation ownership, or public ownership as well as examination of various non-ownership mechanisms of control within privately owned-media. And scholars should examine each form's potential under differing possible, realizable conditions. To only explore presently dominant ownership forms inescapably restricts imagination and places social science in league with conventionality.

The two most likely explanations¹¹⁸ for the research's narrowness are both inappropriate determinants of scholarship. First, the studies' positivist, usually statistical, research methodology requires databases appropriate for statistical analysis. This restricts research to those ownership forms that not only exist but are sufficiently abundant for statistical treatment. An unreasoned tilt toward knowing primarily about "what is" is inherently conservative. But this ideological frame seems built into the research methodology.

Second, for obvious biographical reasons, academic media researchers often replicate perspectives common among professional journalists. Within wide portions of the journalist community, "the" ownership issue is chains versus independents, a perception that seems to reflect experience. Nevertheless, media scholars have repeatedly explained that "facts" do not dictate how an issue is "framed."¹¹⁹ This implicit rejection of epistemological essentialism recognizes that experience is consistent with a focus on a virtually infinite variety of features of ownership and of trends related to it. Experience with ownership could suggest a focus on wealthy versus poor owners, liberal versus conservative

owners, male versus female owners, owners with or without regressive attitudes toward unionization or educational background, new owners versus long-established owners, owners with journalistic versus business versus political backgrounds, etc. Explanation of the professional focus on the chain/independent frame is unnecessary here. It could have grown out of the century's earlier trust-busting era that embodied the populist critique of corporate (bad) versus entrepreneurial (good) values. It could reflect a professional self-image that exalts independence; or a professional inclination toward morality tales with heroic or devilish stars, here, the independent owner or the newspaper empire builders. Moreover, this frame conveniently accommodates statistical research — categorization is comparatively easy¹²⁰ and examples are numerous. The point here, however, is that the frame's conventionality within the profession obscures its narrowness in relation to the normative justification of the research.

Social scientists surely should not merely adopt, without questioning, the views that permeate the profession they are examining as their central organizing themes. Of course, professional insights will be suggestive. Research agendas, however, ought to be contextually generated by considerations of what is important (and possible) to know. Most appropriately, scholarly importance should grow out of a broad sense of human interests.¹²¹ The (unrealized) ideal of academic independence from the world of commerce implies that the scholar should stand back from, should explain and critique, the views of importance held within the spheres she studies. This critique enables scholarly endeavors to provide vision for alternative routes of intellectual and societal development, while an uncritical adoption of currently animating concerns of the profession again creates a conservative bias. Scholarly work should surpass replication of the status quo on the basis of broader, less conventional conceptions of human interest.

Conclusion

The research examined herein suggests that chain ownership matters. Chain ownership's primary documented effects are negative. However, the findings seem tepid, hardly motivating any strong critique of chain ownership or prompting any significant policy interventions. This tepid result, I argue, may be due to the

research not addressing the central ways in which chain ownership might be expected to be a problem.

A concern with the societal significance of ownership provides the obvious justification of the research examined here. Given this concern, the research failed in not comparing both chain and independent dailies with other ownership forms. Despite some superbly executed studies, the net result is inadequately informative. More troubling, the net result is probably misleading in implying that there is relatively little apparent need for change, for example, for policy intervention. I have suggested that this conservative message reflects, to a significant degree, inadequacies in the research methodology. That methodology influenced (in a consistently conservative manner) both the choice of institutions or alternatives to be examined and the questions asked when they are examined.

If existing research is inadequate, what is needed? This review suggests several points. First, the research must be guided by a more developed and more openly value-based conception of what is important about the media, that is, what is wanted from a desirable democratic media. Without that guidance the research is

blind. Of course, consensus on what is desirable in the media is not to be expected, but the point is that the significance of any research is directly related to the persuasiveness of the research's underlying normative premises. As people disagree about these values they will properly disagree about how informative the research is.

Second, scholars cannot allow any apparent need to statistically analyze data to determine what issues, what questions, are worthy of exploration. Instead, research should, for example, make more use of dynamic structural and institutional theories or whatever methodology that enables the researcher to offer informed views about the likely potential of existing (of hypothesized) arrangements to change for the worse or better under future conditions. Otherwise, the research will often be limited to identifying bad results of particular ownership forms after the bad results have occurred and become comparatively entrenched.

Third, the research agenda cannot be allowed to be too narrow. Certainly, it should not be limited by the alternatives that are sufficiently prevalent that statistical analyses can be applied. Rather, policy concerns require consideration of more varied types of both ownership and control.

Endnotes

I wish to thank Frederick Schauer for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

1. A.J. Lieblich, *The Press* 32 (1981).

2. A few commentators are, however, relatively cautious at either concluding that media concentration is that dramatic or that objectionable. See, e.g., Benjamin M. Compaine, "Conclusion: How Few Is Too Few?," in Benjamin M. Compaine, Christopher H. Sterling, Thomas Guback, J. Kendrick Noble, Jr., *Who Owns the Media?* 467-495 (2nd ed. 1982).

3. Outside the journalism journals, there are a few excellent studies theoretically investigating questions concerning whether ownership of media matters. For an excellent example in the context of minority ownership of broadcast stations, see Matthew L. Spitzer, "Justifying Minority Preferences for Broadcasting," 64 *Southern California Law Rev.* 293 (1991).

4. John C. Busterna, Kathleen A. Hansen and Jean Ward, Competition, Ownership, Newsroom and Library Resources in Large Newspapers, 68 *Journalism Q.* 729 (1991) (listing 31 scholarly studies of the significance of chain ownership).

5. Most accounts treat this trend toward chain ownership as a constantly intensifying century phenomenon beginning roughly at the turn of the century. Criticizing typical accounts and their reliance on data from Alfred McClung Lee's classic history, *The Daily Newspaper in America* (1937), Carolyn Stewart Dyer found structural forms comparable to modern chains as involving about 25 percent of the pre-Civil War papers in Wisconsin. Moreover, contrary to more romantic images, she found no evidence "that even one of the 400 [Wisconsin newspapers in 1860] was capitalized exclusively and independently by its operator." Carolyn Stewart Dyer, Political Patronage of the Wisconsin Press, 1849-1860: New Perspective on the Economics of Patronage, 109 *Journalism Monographs* 1, 2-3 (1989).

6. Barbara W. Hartung, Attitudes Toward the Applicability of the Hutchins Report on Press Responsibility, 58 *Journalism Q.* 428, 432 (1981) (groups of eighty in each category were surveyed; "national leaders" were randomly selected from *Who's Who*).

7. Gerald Stone, *Examining Newspapers: What Research Reveals about America's Newspapers* 99 (1987) (emphasis in original).

8. *Id.* at 101.

9. *Id.* at 103-4. A close reader might wonder about the phrasing: "no consistent documentation that [it] is

inherently bad." For policy contexts the more relevant question may be: does the *weight of the evidence*, even if not consistent, indicate that it is bad in practice. A point that I will emphasize below is that often an overemphasis on statistical significance will obscure the existence of evidence that is very relevant for a policy maker who must act or not act on the basis of the more likely possibilities. Some legal scholars have indicated great awareness of this point. See, e.g., Spitzer, *supra* note 9, at 345; Frederick Schauer, Causation Theory and the Causes of Sexual Violence, 1987 *Amer. Bar Foundation Res. J.* 737.

10. My counting could be challenged. For example, both I and Stone include a study that found that Gannett charged a higher rate for ads than comparable non-Gannett papers, although the researcher had not excluded other chain papers from the comparison group.

11. John C. Busterna, Kathleen A. Hansen and Jean Ward, Competition, Ownership, Newsroom and Library Resources in Large Newspapers, 68 *Journalism Q.* 729-39, 730 (1991).

12. Busterna, 11, at 737.

13. *Id.* Busterna, *supra* note 11, at 731.

14. John C. Schweitzer, David H. Weaver and Gerald C. Stone, Morning-Evening Newspaper Circulation: What Effect Do Appearance and Content Have?, 54 *Journalism Q.* 515-522 (1977). In cities with chain-owned newspapers the general relation did not hold for content similarities and the opposite relation (i.e., differences increased dual subscription) held for *appearance* similarities.

15. Joseph C. Pilegge, Jr., Two-Party Endorsements in a One-Party State, 58 *Journalism Q.* 449 (1981).

16. Bryon St. Dizier, Editorial Page Editors and Endorsements: Chain-owned vs. Independent Newspapers, 8 *Newspaper Res. J.* 63-68 (Fall 1986) (responses from 85 editorial page editors, constituting a 75 percent response rate from a random selection of half the dailies with circulation above greater than 50,000).

17. *Id.* at 65. St. Dizier also noted a 1979 report by American Society of Newspaper Editors where slightly more chain editors (60 percent) than independents (half) indicate that they decide on national electoral endorsements, with both groups indicating satisfaction with their authority. *Id.* at 64.

18. *Id.* at 66. In contrast to endorsements, at *both types of papers* the editorial position almost equally and generally *overwhelmingly supported the demo-*

cratic position on the issues separating Reagan and Mondale. Id.

19. There is some ambiguity. The study did not report percentages of chain and independent papers where the editor's vote and paper's endorsement diverged or where the endorsement contradicted the publisher's preference. Still, the simplest, most plausible explanation of the data is that editors at chains exercise less control.

20. *Id.* at 68. This claim refers to ownership's effect on endorsements. Ownership may also affect hiring, which could explain why 58 percent of the editors at independents called themselves Democrats compared to 33 percent of those at chain-owned papers. *Id.* at 67.

At both types of papers, over two thirds of the editors thought their publisher was more conservative than they were — with 5 percent believing the publisher was a Democrat at chain papers and 37 percent at independents. *Id.* at 67. Not only do editors tend to be more liberal than publishers, reporters tend to be more liberal than editors. Celilie Gaziano, *News People's Ideology and the Credibility Debate*, 9 *Newspaper Res. J.* 1, 2 & sources in n.4 (Fall 1987). See also, David H Weaver & G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *Journalists—Who Are They, Really?*, 6 *Media Studies J.* 63, 73-76 (1992) (journalists more Democratic than 10 years earlier (44 percent to 38 percent) and less Republican (16 percent to 19 percent) and report being more liberal than the public).

21. Patrick R. Parsons, John Finnegan, Jr., William Beneham, *Editors and Their Roles*, in Robert G. Picard et al., *Press Concentration and Monopoly* 91-103 (1988).

22. *Id.* at 102-03. Chains were also more likely to have written codes discouraging organizational memberships not related to the profession, although these written code provisions were uncommon at either chain or independent papers. The authors did not show that these codes correlated with behavior nor that the memberships would be undesirable. *Id.* at 102. Cf. Jason P. Isralowitz, *The Reporter as Citizen: Newspaper Ethics and Constitutional Values*, 141 *U. Penn. L.Rev.* 221 (1992).

23. Dean M. Flatt, *Managerial Incentives: Effects at a Chain Owned Daily*, 2 *Newspaper Res. J.* 48-55 (Oct 1980). The incentive systems are in part designed to increase executive power to influence subordinates toward hierarchically defined objectives and partly designed to increase subordinate concern with chain profitability. The only reason to believe that either feature would lead the editors to favor journalistic quality over profitability is Flatt's hopeful but unestablished assertion that "[t]he chain's strategy for long term profitability is the overall journalistic improvement of its papers." *Id.* at 55.

24. *Id.* at 55.

25. W.I. Romanow and W.C. Soderlund, *The Southam Press Acquisition of the Windsor Star: A Canadian Case Study of Change*, 24 *Gazette* 255-70 (1978).

26. *Id.* at 269.

27. *Id.* at 268, 269.

28. *Id.* at 269.

29. The study provided no comparative material to show whether similar changes were occurring at other papers whose ownership status had not changed.

30. All the percentages given below are taken from the authors' tables, *id.* at 262, 263, 266.

31. An earlier study predicted that a corrupting influence of chains on news operations would lie in the use of chain wire services with a resulting homogenizing influence and a reduced emphasis on local editors' judgment. John Soloski, *Economics and Management: The Real Influence of Newspaper Groups*, 1 *Newspaper Res. J.* 19-28 (November 1979).

32. The article also reported a 25 percent decline in use of staff for feature materials without noting that this was 25 percent absolute decline — i.e., use of staff for features declined from 42.9 percent of features to 17.7 percent, cutting staff features more than half. *Id.* at 263.

33. Lee B. Becker, Randy Beam and John Russial, *Correlates of Daily Newspaper Performance in New England*, 55 *Journalism Q.* 100, 101 (1978).

34. Becker et al., *supra* note 33, at 107.

35. This issue is considered further in Part III, *infra*.

36. Hartung, *supra* note 6, at 430 (survey found between 97 percent and 100 percent of editor or publishers and journalism educators agreeing on these points).

37. C. Edwin Baker, *Advertising and a Democratic Press* (arguing that these standards of journalistic performance may reflect a market driven need to gain advertising revenue).

38. For a critique of this limitation, see Part III *infra*.

39. The articles were not entirely clear that this was their objective. Still, it is difficult to see the point of an investigation of homogeneity in chain endorsement practices if it is not to be able to attribute any homogeneity found to the chain ownership — and that

would presumably involve suggesting that a different endorsement pattern would occur without the chain ownership.

40. Cecilie Gaziano, Chain Newspaper Homogeneity and Presidential Endorsements, 1972-1988, 66 *Journalism Q.* 836-845; Daniel B. Wackman, Donald M. Gillmor, Cecilie Gaziano and Everette E. Dennis, Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements, 52 *Journalism Q.* 411-420 (1975). Both studies relied on data collected by *Editor & Publisher's* poll of papers, but other research has found that this data base is both incomplete and has various biases that can make any subsequent analysis misleading. Roger Gafke and David Leuthold, 56 *Journalism Q.* 383 (1979).

41. Gaziano, *supra* note , at 845.

42. To get 85 percent homogeneity, unanimity is required until the size gets to be seven. With a random selection of papers, where 80 percent of endorsing papers favor a single party, the odds of unanimity for a three-member chain equals $.8^3 + .2^3 = .520$ while the odds for a six paper group equals $.8^6 + .2^6 = .262$.

43. Gaziano, *supra* note 40, at 343.

44. Support might also be found in St. Dizier, *supra* note 16. In the 1984 Presidential election, chain papers' endorsements were apparently much more likely than those of independent papers to conflict with the voting intentions of the editorial page editor, suggesting (but not proving) greater editorial influence of the chain publisher or owner. An alternative, more benign possibility is that this greater divergence in chain papers reflected the chain's greater willingness to hire editors with diverse views.

45. Ronald H. Wagenberg and Walter C. Soderlund, The Influence of Chain-Ownership on Editorial Comment in Canada, 52 *Journalism Q.* 93, 98 (1975).

46. *Id.*

47. One might expect that the French language paper would be quite different from the English dailies. Excluding this French language paper from the control group, the proportion of editorials dealing with political institution themes varied from 43.5 percent to 32.8 percent in the four chain papers and from 22.2 percent to 11.0 percent in the two control papers. The proportion of editorials containing political leader themes varied from 16.4 percent to 8.1 percent in chain papers and from 5.4 percent to 2.2 percent in the two controls. This certainly seems like a dramatic difference between the chain papers and the controls. Moreover, one of the control papers was chain owned (by a different chain) and in these examples it was the control paper that most resembled the Free Press

papers. See *id.* at 97.

48. *Id.* at 95.

49. Roya Akhavan-Majib, Anita Rife, Sheila Gopinath, Chain Ownership and Editorial Independence: A Case Study of Gannett Newspapers, 68 *Journalism Q.* 59, 61-62 (1991).

50. *Id.* at 64-66. This consistent liberal line, although viewed in relation to a single chain, might seem curious given chains' general Republican presidential endorsement pattern and the more conservative orientation of their publishers. Interestingly, a study that found chains overwhelming endorsing Reagan also found them, mostly by large margins and in patterns very similar to independents, strongly taking the Democratic position on eight of nine issues dividing Democrats and Republicans. St. Dizier, *supra* note 16, at 66-67.

51. Theodore L. Glasser, David S. Allen and S. Elizabeth Blanks, The Influence of Chain Ownership on News Play: A Case Study, 66 *Journalism Q.* 607 (1989). On chain effects on news, see also Ronald G. Hicks and James S. Featherston, Duplication of Newspaper Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations, 55 *Journalism Q.* 549 (1978).

52. *Id.* at 612.

53. *Id.* at 613-14.

54. *Id.* at 614.

55. *Id.*

56. Wackman et al., *supra* note 40, at 113.

57. Quoted in Akhavan-Majib, *supra* note 49, at 60.

58. Carol Smith, Running Newspapers or Building Empires: Analysis of Gannett's Ideology, 9 *Newspaper Res. J.* 37, 42 (Winter 1988). Although constituting 17 percent of the ideologically coded messages in the examined institutional advertisements, this claim of editorial independence only constituted 3 percent of the ideological messages in its annual reports, and 4 percent in its internal newsletter. *Id.*

59. Few of the articles considering chain's homogeneity explicitly examine why this would be bad. For an excellent exception, see Glasser et al., *supra* note 51.

60. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* 42 (David Spitz, ed., 1975) (first published 1859).

61. See Vincent Blasi, The Checking Value in First Amendment Theory, 1977 *American Bar Foundation*

Research J. 521. Although the watchdog concern could be a basis for a critique of chain-produced homogeneity, some might argue that chains' greater power might produce a more effective check on government power.

62. The intrinsic value of communicator's self-expression is separate from more instrumental assessments of the press discussed above. However, the instrumental analysis, which sometimes justifies press rights beyond an individual's right to make choices for herself, is the proper way to evaluate the press as an institution. See C. Edwin Baker, *Human Liberty and Freedom of Speech* 229-234 (1989).

63. This is recognized in some of the better articles that look for actual effects. E.g., Akhavan-Majib, *supra* note 49, at 60.

64. For example, research could challenge the often casually made claim that, "[b]y its nature, ownership implies ... potential control," Akhavan-Majib, note 49, at 60.

65. Wackman et al., *supra* note 40, at 420.

66. Jim Ottawa, Jr., "Remarks," Oct 7, New England Newspaper Association Fall Convention [n.d.]. Personal conversations with Warren Phillips (fall 1992).

67. See, e.g., James D. Squires, *Read All About It!* (1993).

68. C.K. McClatchy, *How Newspapers Are Owned — And Does It Matter?*, pp. 7, 8 (#23, Press-Enterprise Lecture Series, 1988).

69. *Id.* at 9.

70. James Rosse, *Economic Limits on Press Responsibility*, *Studies in Industry Economics* No. 56 (Dept. of Economics, Stanford U., 1975).

71. Media commentators love to offer appealing stories about commitment to quality being profitable in the long run — like the *New York Times'* decision during World War II to provide more news rather than use their limited supply of newsprint for advertising while its now defunct competitors made the opposite choice, or studies finding winning Pulitzer prizes is associated with added circulation. Still, the commentary mostly sees quality and service in tension with profitability.

72. No one seems to object to profits if quality (and circulation) are not sacrificed — which, for instance, would be the case if increased quality presented the best way to increase circulation and profits. And surely most commentators pragmatically accept that

some profit orientation is necessary, e.g. to avoid bankruptcy. Any unanimity, however, turns out to be contextual on the acceptability of a profit orientation. Those who work on or contribute to journals that survive on volunteer labor and other subsidies and that typically serve artistic, social, or political concerns might deny that market concerns should play any role.

73. See C. Edwin Baker, *Advertising and a Democratic Press* 27-30 (1994).

74. David Pearce Demers, *Corporate Structure and Emphasis on Profits and Product Quality at U.S. Daily Newspapers*, 68 *Journalism Q.* 15, 23 (1991) (chain editors more likely to report profits as goal driving their organization; $p < .01$, open-ended question); David Pearce Demers & Daniel B. Wackman, *Effect of Chain Ownership On Newspaper Management Goals*, 9 *Newspaper Res J.* 59, 63-4 (Winter 1988) (in regression analysis, chain ownership was significantly related, ($p < .05$), to editors mentioning profit as organizational goal; but authors noted that study had a very low response rate).

75. C. N. Olien, P. J. Tichenor, and G.A. Donohue, *Relation Between Corporate Ownership and Editor Attitudes About Business*, 65 *Journalism Q.* 259, 264 (1988).

76. *Id.* at 264. This variation in role differentiation may also partly explain why Demers' study found that circulation was negatively correlated with editors mentioning profits as a value in their organization. Demers (1991), *supra*, 68 *Journalism Q.* at 23 ($p < .001$; closed question).

77. John C. Busterna, *How Managerial Ownership Affects Profit Maximization in Newspaper Firms*, 66 *Journalism Q.* 302, 305-306 (1989).

78. *Id.* at 307.

79. William B. Blankenburg and Gary W. Ozanich, *The Effects of Public Ownership on the Financial Performance of Newspaper Corporations*, 70 *Journalism Q.* 68 (1993).

80. William B. Blankenburg, *Newspaper Ownership and Control of Circulation to Increase Profits*, 59 *Journalism Q.* 390-98, 393 (1982).

81. *Id.* at 393-94.

82. *Id.* at 395-97.

83. *Id.* at 398.

84. See Olien, *supra* note 75.

85. Rosse, *supra* note 70. Although Rosse explains why only one daily can be expected to be based in a given city, he relied on an "umbrella" theory of competition and on assumptions concerning competition for advertising to argue that papers have little monopoly power.

86. Baker, *supra* note 37.

87. See, e.g., James Curran, "Mass Media and Democracy: A Reappraisal," in James Curran and Michael Gurevitch, *Mass Media and Society* 82 (1991); James Curran, "Rethinking the Media as a Public Sphere," in Peter Dahlgren & Colin Sparks, *Communication and Citizenship* 27 (1991). More traditional theorists have also emphasized the advantages of organizing different portions of the media along different structural lines. E.g., see Lee C. Bollinger, *Images of a Free Press* (1991).

88. *Journalism Quarterly* publishes important but rare articles on papers operated on the basis of other ownership forms. Unfortunately, these articles are generally limited to anecdotal or historical portrayals rather than systematic attempts to assess merits and demerits of the ownership form. See, e.g., Werner J. Severin, *The Milwaukee Journal: Employee Owned Prizewinner*, 56 *Journalism Q.* 783 (1979). Severin notes that the employee-owned *Milwaukee Journal* is regularly ranked as one of the country's top ten papers. *Id.* at 787.

89. Of course, my categorization embodies particular concerns. For other purposes very different categorizations of the research would be better.

90. Although Blankenburg avoided endorsing this view, he suggested it with the comment that "if news-editorial quality can be equated with expenditures, then it's better to have a single large daily than two half its size." William B. Blankenburg, *Newspaper Scale & Newspaper Expenditures*, 10 *Newspaper Res. J.* 97, 101 (Winter 1989).

91. John C. Busterna, Kathleen A. Hansen and Jean Ward, *Competition, Ownership, Newsroom and Library Resources in Large Newspapers*, 68 *Journalism Q.* 729 (1991).

92. *Id.* at 737.

93. Gerald L. Grotta, *Consolidation of Newspapers: What Happens to the Consumer?*, 48 *Journalism Q.* 245, 248 (1971).

94. *Id.* at 247.

95. *Id.* at 250. Since Grotta did not provide numerical data on his control and experimental groups, his study is not even suggestive as to whether chain ownership

is beneficial or detrimental.

96. Stephen Lacy and Frederick Fico, *Newspaper Quality and Ownership: Rating the Groups*, 11 *Newspaper Res. J.* 42-56 (Spring 1990). The quality criteria, derived from a list developed by Leo Bogart based on a survey of the views of 746 daily newspaper editors, were: high ratio of staff-written copy to wire service and feature service copy; total amount of non-advertising copy in news section; high ratio of news interpretation and background to spot news; high ratio of illustrations to text; number of wire services; length of average story in news section; and high ratio of non-advertising to advertising in news section. They also used a factor not developed by Bogart, reporter workload, measured by inches of news copy divided by the number of reporters with bylines. *Id.* at 45-46.

97. Dan Drew & G. Cleveland Wilhoit, *Newshole Allocation Policies of American Daily Newspapers*, 53 *Journalism Q.* 434, 439 (1976).

The authors claimed that their primary result was to challenge, "at least in day-to-day operations, Bagdikian's assertion that the advertising department usually determines newshole size." *Id.* at 440. Their claim is quite odd. They describe papers as using three main devices to determine the newshole size. The second and third, used by 33 percent of the papers surveyed, are based directly on the size of the paper — hence newshole is determined by the other variable factor, quantity of advertising. Although the most common device (41 percent of papers) is a fixed minimum newshole size, in the long run advertising quantity is likely to influence this minimum. Moreover, on the day to day basis, this technique adds more space to the newshole minimum once advertising exceeds a certain level, with the addition typically based on the amount of advertising. Thus, even this method of determining newshole size supports Bagdikian's general claim. Finally, to the extent Bagdikian's underlying thesis is about the priority papers give to advertising, his thesis receives additional indirect support from evidence of how papers handle late breaking news. While 83 percent of the papers "frequently" respond by displacing other news (defining frequently as more than fifteen times a year), 56 percent frequently use the story later, and 19 percent frequently add pages, only 2 percent frequently displace advertising. This practice of seldom allowing news to encroach on advertising space can be compared with the 49 percent of papers which frequently change newshole size after it is initially fixed to accommodate (late breaking?) advertising.

98. Busterna, *supra* note , 68 *Journalism Q.* at 731 n.10.

99. Barry R. Litman and Janet Bridges, *An Economic Analysis of Daily Newspaper Performance*, 7 *Newspaper Res. J.* 9, 19-21 (Spring 1986).

100. Keith Kenney and Stephen Lacy, Economic Forces Behind Newspapers' Increasing Use of Color and Graphics, 8 *Newspaper Res. J.* 33, 38-39 (Spring 1987).

101. TAN 33 *supra*.

102. Gerard H. Borstel, Ownership, Competition and Comment in 20 Small Dailies, 33 *Journalism Q.* 220-22 (1956) (of twelve non-competing papers, four of six independents as compared to two of six chain papers published columns of indigenous comment).

103. George A. Donohue, Clarice N. Olien and Phillip J. Tichenor, Reporting Conflict by Pluralism, Newspaper Type and Ownership, 62 *Journalism Q.* 489, 489 & 497-99 (1985).

104. *Id.* at 497-99.

105. Ralph R. Thrift, How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor of Newspaper, 54 *Journalism Q.* 327 (1977).

106. *Id.* at 329-30.

107. Measuring quality by the amount of resources committed would have greater plausibility if, given the decision to commit some amount of resources, competition (or a monopolist's concerns with profits) leads the enterprise to use the resources to provide as good a product as possible. Both theory and empirical evidence undermine any claim that the existing market structure induces newspapers to use their resources to provide the product most valued by readers (as measured by willingness and ability to pay) as well as the claim that doing so would represent an adequate criteria of "quality." The economic notion of value is simply not an appropriate, certainly not an adequate, measure of quality. See Baker, *supra* note 37, at 71-82.

108. W.B. Reddaway, The Economics of Newspapers, 73 *The Economic Journal* 201, 209 (1963) (quoting a British Royal Commission Report).

109. See Blasi, *supra* note 61.

110. Admittedly, the social world is sufficiently complex that additional information could support a challenge to this initial judgment. For example, did the abolitionist paper only reach the already converted? Did it provide information that aided further political efforts or did it substitute for and thereby suppress politics? What were the actual uses and effects of the other papers?

111. Three considerations justify ignoring these studies' reports of non-findings for most purposes. First, at most, a report that no effect of ownership was found provides evidence that ownership did not

matter in respect to the feature examined. That is not evidence that ownership does not matter, just that the research may have looked at the wrong thing — like the murder investigation that looks in the wrong place for evidence.

An example will illustrate two other points about interpreting data. Not knowing whether a coin is fair, a person is best to bet it will again come up the side that it most frequently came up before. Even after one flip, the best bet is for a repeat. (A repeat is equally likely if the coin is fair and the better bet given the chance that it may be unfair.) In contrast, even if the first five flips all produced heads and, if many more flips were completed, would never turn up tails, the five flip sample is too small for statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level, a typical measure of significance. Following the pattern of the research examined here, the social science report would state that the five heads produced no evidence of an unbalanced coin.

This coin-flip example illustrates that statistical significance is highly sensitive to the data set. Generally, both the larger and more consistent the effect (e.g., due to the form of ownership) and the larger the sample set, the more the statistical analysis can be predicted to pick up the effect. But failure to identify an effect, especially in small samples, does not suggest its absence.

Third, as the example illustrates, statistical significance is a particular degree of certainty. Any time a policy choice must be made on the basis of all available evidence, lack of statistical significance should not rule out reliance on the results. Rather, the question is, first, whether the study produces "any" reason to think a factor leads to a relevant effect and, second, how much weight should be given to that evidence, a question for which the degree of statistical significance has some bearing.

112. These problems suggest a possible rationale for statistical treatment of papers that win journalism awards — e.g., Pulitzers, within certain categories. This, however, seems like it will be much too crude an instrument from which to generate much insight.

113. The possibility of a statistical analysis of the non-reports hypothesized above differ in two respects from the correlation of magazines' receipt of advertising revenue from tobacco companies and their non-reports on smoking's contribution to cancer, see Kenneth E. Warner, Linda M. Goldenhar, and Catherine McLaughlin, "Cigarette Advertising and Magazine Coverage of the Hazards of Smoking," 326 *New England J. of Medicine* 305 (Jan 30, 1992): the researcher knows the issue that is "not reported" and the issue is, in a sense, continual "news" so that non-reporting over a long period of time can be compared with occasional reporting in other magazines.

114. Actually, the independent apparently is more likely to report conflict and the chain to use more

graphics, but the point is, even if they were the same in these respects, these are not the needed inquiries.

115. See Becker et al., *supra* note 33.

116. An economist might insist that market theory fills the gap — that the entity most responsive to the market will change in the desired way. At this point, it should be clear that most observers view mere responsiveness to the market as part of the threat, not the solution.

117. For a good example, see James N. Dertouzos and Kenneth E. Thorpe, *Newspaper Groups: Economies of Scale, Tax Laws and Merger Incentives* (Rand R-2878-SBA) (1982) (attributing the change toward chain ownership not to economic efficiencies but to government policies).

118. A possible third explanation might reflect the sociology of academia — the pressure to appear scientific by applying statistical analyses to data sets. Cf. Stephen R. Lacy and Daniel Riffe, Sins of Omission and Commission in Mass Communication Quantitative Research, 70 *Journalism Q.* 126 (1993) (arguing that the “more rigorous scholars are methodologically, the more valid, reliable and useful their findings will be”).

119. See, e.g., Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching* 6 (1980) (“What makes the world beyond direct experience look natural is a media frame,” citing work of Gaye Tuchman and Stuart Hall).

120. But there are categorization difficulties. Chains with one dominant paper and a number of small, minor subsidiaries, particularly if ownership is tightly held within a founding family, may for some purposes be expected to behave like an independent, especially in respect to the behavior of its dominant paper.

121. That is, human “emancipatory interests” should be central. Jurgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971).