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# The watchdog role of newspapers: Newspaper coverage of Sinclair Broadcasting's announcement to air a one-sided documentary right before the 2004 presidential election.

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THE WATCHDOG ROLE OF NEWSPAPERS:  
NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF SINCLAIR BROADCASTING'S ANNOUNCEMENT  
TO AIR A  
ONE-SIDED DOCUMENTARY RIGHT BEFORE THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION.

by Greta K. Weiderman

B.S., Bowling Green State University, 2002

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the

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in the Graduate School

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Approved by:

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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Greta K. Weiderman, for the Master of Arts degree in Mass Communication and Media Arts, presented on Aug. 21, 2009, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: THE WATCHDOG ROLE OF NEWSPAPERS: NEWSPAPER COVERAGE OF SINCLAIR BROADCASTING'S ANNOUNCEMENT TO AIR A ONE-SIDED DOCUMENTARY RIGHT BEFORE THE 2004 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Dr. William Babcock

This thesis is a content analysis examining newspaper coverage of Sinclair Broadcasting's announcement that it planned to air a program titled "Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal" 13 days before the November 2004 presidential election. Sinclair Broadcast Group ordered its 61 stations to preempt regular programming and run the show, which attacked then presidential candidate John Kerry's activism against the Vietnam War (Jensen, 2004). The film was to be presented as news programming.

This study examines how 41 newspapers in cities with Sinclair television stations covered the announcement to run the "Stolen Honor" documentary and the situation following it in news stories, editorials and columns. It also examines if the ownership or circulation of the newspapers was related to the way they covered the controversy and whether these newspapers served their watchdog functions.

The results indicated that there was no relationship between a newspaper's performance of the watchdog role, as measured by the watchdog index, and its circulation or ownership. But the study did find, however, that as a whole, the newspapers performed their watchdog role.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my father, the late F. Dennis Hale, who was helping me through the proposal phase of this project before his untimely death. He was an outstanding researcher in the field of journalism law. The confidence he instilled in me gave me the ability to complete this project when it seemed impossible.

Also a special thanks to Dr. Tom J. Johnson, who continued to be my acting chair despite moving to Texas Tech before in 2006 before I even defended my proposal. He truly went above and beyond what was required, and his efforts are greatly appreciated.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In the last half of the twentieth century, there has been a decided increase in the growth of media firms for various reasons (Picard, 2002). Some have grown because of the aspirations of leaders who reinvested profits and gathered new capital for their companies, some of which became publicly traded (Picard, 2002). In other cases, company leaders exploited the weaknesses of other firms through acquisitions or mergers. Recent examples of media companies that have become powerful conglomerates include Rupert Murdoch's News Corp. and Gannett Co., which was once a little known local newspaper company. By April of 2009, Gannett Co. published 85 daily newspapers, including USA Today, and 850 non-daily publications (Picard, 2002; Gannett Web site).

Critics argue that as media companies become larger, the quality of the news they present diminishes, or the news itself is internally censored. Fewer media companies now own more media outlets, and media conglomeration has proliferated in television station ownership. A small number of companies are increasing in size, while the gap in revenue between the large and small companies is growing (State of the Media 2004 Web site). More recently, the advertising market for local television stations was hit hard in 2008. Car advertising, the industry's biggest revenue source, had a bad year, and by some estimates, profit margins were cut in half at local television stations and newsroom staffs were cut (State of the Media 2009 Web site).

The concentration of media ownership has shifted control of local television stations and other media outlets from local hands into the corporate headquarters of media

conglomerates (Croteau & Hoynes, 2001). One consequence of the decline in local control is a decline in local content. Some are worried that consolidation will destroy the quality of local television news. In some cases, large television news conglomerates have cut costs by producing news casts from one city that they air in several locations while not telling viewers that the news is not being produced locally (State of the Media 2004 Web Site). The Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc., which reached 24 percent of U.S. households in fall 2004, is a well-known example of this type of integration. In August 2006, it reached approximately 22 percent of all U.S. households (Sinclair Broadcast, Inc. Web site). Its headquarters in Maryland sends weather and sports segments to stations around the country, cutting the company's local news costs (State of the Media 2004 Web site). Critics charge that this consolidation is harming the quality of local news because companies use fewer reporters to cover each market, and the news becomes more like the content that would be provided by a wire service. The news becomes generic, and fewer local events and issues are covered (State of the Media 2004 Web site). The number of reporters being used in local television news is also declining. The Project for Excellence in Journalism study found that from 1998 to 2002, the percentage of stories presented by reporters across the nation decreased from 62 to 43 percent in local news casts. Only 36 percent of the stories in the organization's 2005 study came from reporters, while 60 percent were told by anchors with no video at all (State of the News Media 2006 Web site). More recently, local stations started laying off more newsroom staff in 2008 (State of the News Media 2009 Web site). In fact, about one-third of the stations in the top 25 markets and those in more mid-sized markets cut staff.

Media critics argue that as the media become more concentrated, each media company

has more political and economic power (Albarran, 2002). In today's media climate of fewer companies owning more media outlets, the watchdog role of the media has come into question. Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm (1956) state that the press's watchdog role is to prevent officers of the state from abusing their authority. The watchdog theory of the press states that the press serves as a "fourth branch of government." The theory contends that a free press will allow the media to independently criticize and evaluate the government and other institutions to ensure that they do not overstep their power over people (Lichtenberg, 1990). In the Pentagon Papers case, Justice Hugo Black wrote that "the government's power to censor the press was abolished so that the press would remain forever free to censure the government" (*New York Times Co. v. United States*, 1971). Black also wrote that the most important time for exercising this power of the press is when the government is sending the nation's young to "die of foreign fevers and foreign shot and shell" (Saldana, 2001). Giles (2001) argues that "the watchdog role of the press is never more vital than during a national crisis" (p. 3). This is just one reason the watchdog role of the press was important during the 2004 presidential election, when the Iraq War was well underway.

The watchdog role of the media over the government and over other media is especially important in a representative democracy like the United States, because private citizens directly participate in government by voting and petitioning the government. It is important that they have access to information about government actions (Hale, 1977). Private citizens don't have the means to personally gather information about all of the governmental agencies that affect them. Therefore, the press, acting as a watchdog, should scrutinize and observe government agencies and report on their activities (Hale,

1977). In fact, the press's watchdog role in monitoring the conduct of government officials is vital in a democracy (Francke, 1995).

Scholars argue that media should act as watchdogs not only against the government, but also against other powerful institutions, including other media outlets as well as large corporations. The watchdog role of the media includes policing institutions of societal power, such as public utilities, medical providers, powerful individuals who don't hold public office (like CEOs) and conglomerates, including media conglomerates (Stone et al., 1997). Certain niche publications or trade magazines for journalists, including the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *Quill* and *Nieman Reports*, provide criticism and praise of various media outlets and products. More mainstream media like newspapers, television news and magazines criticize each other, while blogs and other nontraditional media criticize the mainstream press. For example, there was a frenzy of media attention on Dan Rather and CBS when bloggers and then other media reported that the documents Rather used to question President George W. Bush's National Guard record weren't authentic (Holmberg, 2004).

There is, however, some evidence that media may not act as strong watchdogs of other media. Glowaki, Johnson, and Kranenburg (2004) studied adwatches, stories that analyze whether campaign advertisements are truthful. The researchers found that over the 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential election campaigns, three newspapers, *The New York Times*, *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Los Angeles Times*, ran only 87 adwatches, which was 30 percent of the total stories about ads (Glowaki et al., 2004). Media, however, do often criticize other media when they do something clearly unethical. When a broadcasting company that owns television stations that reach 24 percent of Americans

orders all of its stations to preempt regularly scheduled programs and run a one-sided political documentary days before the election, the watchdog theory predicts that the announcement would receive widespread criticism from newspapers in the markets the television stations reach. The media should serve not only as a check on government power, but also as a check on media power as well (Curtis, 2004).

This thesis examined the watchdog role of newspapers in alerting the public about Sinclair Broadcasting's plans to air a partisan documentary 13 days before the November 2004 presidential election. Sinclair Broadcast Group ordered its stations to preempt regular programming and run a program titled, "Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal." The show attacked then presidential candidate John Kerry's activism against the Vietnam War (Jensen, 2004). The film was to be presented as news programming. This study examined how newspapers in cities with Sinclair television stations covered the announcement to run the "Stolen Honor" documentary and the situation following it as a news story, in editorials, and in columns. It also examined if the ownership or circulation of the newspapers was related to the way the newspapers covered the decision and whether these newspapers served their watchdog functions.

### Sinclair Broadcasting

In 1971, Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. began under founder Julian Sinclair Smith as a lone UHF station in Baltimore (Rosenberg, 2004). His four sons started operating the company in 1986, and it grew rapidly throughout the 1990s by acquiring additional broadcast stations. It was one of the most aggressive companies as far as exploiting the media ownership regulation changes in the 1996 Telecommunications Act (State of the

Media 2005 Web site). In October and November 2004, it owned and operated 61 television stations in 40 markets (Sinclair Broadcast, Inc. Web site). The stations were, and still are, spread throughout the country, in markets including Baltimore, Pittsburgh, and Las Vegas. In 2009, it owns 58 television stations in 35 markets that reach 22 percent of U.S. households (Sinclair Broadcasting Web site).

Sinclair's had to fight in court to be allowed to continue acquiring stations. In 2002, the Sinclair group won a ruling from a federal appeals court ordering the FCC to either rationalize its ban on broadcast companies that own two or more stations in a single market or eliminate its regulations (State of the Media 2005 Web site). In fact, Sinclair Broadcasting announced on March 3, 2005 that it had filed a petition with the U.S. Supreme Court to review a lower court's judgment on media ownership rules (IMAS Publishing Group Web site). Sinclair had asked the high court to decide whether the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit mistakenly disagreed with the D.C. Circuit by instructing the FCC to continue enforcing the eight-voices test, which states that at least eight independently-owned-and-operated full power television stations must remain in a designated market after a proposal for consolidation is made (IMAS Publishing Group Web site). Sinclair also argued that the Third Circuit's decision contradicted the 1996 Telecommunications Act, which required the FCC to eliminate unnecessary rules. Sinclair argued that the ruling hindered its ability to compete with other large markets (IMAS Publishing Group Web Site).

Critics charged that Sinclair Broadcasting used creative, even illegal, strategies to avoid federal rules that forbid broadcasters from controlling two television stations in the same market. To evade the rules, Sinclair CEO David Smith's mother Carolyn and

Sinclair employee Edwin Edwards bought a station in a market where the company already owned an outlet. They immediately turned control of the new operation over to Sinclair (Klinenberg, 2005). In 2001, the FCC ruled that Sinclair had violated federal ownership laws and fined it \$40,000 but did not force it to sell any stations to comply.

### Sinclair Pushes Anti-Kerry Documentary

Weeks before the Nov. 2, 2004 presidential election, Sinclair Broadcasting Inc. announced that it would air a program about presidential candidate John Kerry's activism against the Vietnam War. Sinclair Broadcast Group ordered its stations to preempt regular programming and air the show titled, "Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal" (Jensen, 2004). Fourteen of the Sinclair stations were in political swing states including Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. The show featured former POWs accusing Kerry, a Navy veteran and Vietnam War protester, of making their ordeal worse by prolonging the war (Jensen, 2004). Sinclair planned to replace 90 minutes of prime time news programming with the show, and it stood to lose \$430,000 in advertising revenue by running it without commercials (Rosenberg, 2004). After the announcement that the documentary would run, advertisers retaliated. Burger King announced it would pull its advertisements from all Sinclair stations the night the documentary was scheduled to run. After extensive public protest and a dip in Sinclair stock, Sinclair Broadcasting aired a modified program on Oct. 22 about the documentary's allegations titled, "A POW Story: Politics, Pressure and the Media."

Immediately after Sinclair's announcement to run the documentary, Democratic senators wrote former FCC Chairman Michael Powell and urged him to investigate

whether the documentary was a proper use of public airways, but Powell said the FCC wouldn't block the program from airing (Rosenberg, 2004). Groups like Media Access Project, a non-profit public access telecommunications law firm, and Common Cause, a liberal organization, criticized Sinclair for running the anti-Kerry program, saying it was an example of the dangers of big media (Rosenberg, 2004).

David Wade, a Kerry campaign spokesman, told the Los Angeles Times,

“It’s not the American way for powerful corporations to strong-arm local broadcasters to air lies promoting a political agenda. It’s beyond yellow journalism: it’s a smear bankrolled by Republican money, and I don’t think Americans will stand for it” (Jensen, 2004).

While some argue that Sinclair’s announcement to air “Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal” wasn’t politically motivated, Sinclair executives had a history of donating to the Republican party. In fact, Sinclair executives gave more than \$309,000 in campaign contributions to Republicans from 1993 to 2004 (Rosenberg, 2004). In 2004, Sinclair executives gave \$66,000 to Republicans, ranking it twelfth among radio and television station group contributors (Jansen, 2004). Sinclair's chief Washington correspondent, Jon Lieberman, was fired after he spoke out against airing the documentary. Lieberman said what bothered him the most was that Sinclair officials planned to present the documentary as news (Gratz, 2005).

## Introduction to the Methods

This study examined the watchdog role of newspapers and find out how many newspapers in markets with television stations owned by Sinclair Broadcasting criticized

the company for announcing it would run a partisan documentary before the 2004 presidential election. The decision was announced on September 24, 2004 and Sinclair Broadcasting's stations ran a modified form of the documentary on October 22, 2004. This study determined what type of newspaper coverage the situation received.

A content analysis examined the 41 daily newspapers in cities where Sinclair Broadcasting television stations were located in September, October, and November 2004, during the time of the controversy. A search was done using the key phrases, "Stolen Honor," "Sinclair," "Sinclair Broadcasting," and "Kerry documentary" to locate stories related to the incident. News stories, editorials and columns were analyzed. The newspapers' watchdog functions were confirmed if the newspapers published stories about the controversy, published lengthy pieces, mentioned the local television stations, published stories written by local staff members, published opinion pieces, and published pieces that were critical of Sinclair.

Watchdog role was measured by several variables, including: Local Sinclair Mention, Byline, Tone of Coverage, Coverage Length and Placement.

The variables Circulation Size and Newspaper Ownership are the study's main independent variables. They are measured as ratio level variables and used to see if there is a relationship between circulation size and newspaper ownership and a newspaper's performance of the watchdog role.

### Research Questions

The study addressed the following seven major questions:

- 1.) How many news items (news stories, columns, and editorials) were published by

each paper?

2.) What was the placement of the news items published by the newspapers?

3.) What percentage of the news stories, columns, and editorials published about Sinclair Broadcasting and the Stolen Honor controversy mentioned the local Sinclair station?

4.) What was the tone of the news stories, columns, and editorials? In other words, what percentage of those news stories, columns, and editorials were positive, neutral and negative in regards to Sinclair Broadcasting in the context of the controversy?

5.) What was the mean number of words for news stories and opinion items (editorials and columns) published by the newspapers overall?

6.) Was there a correlation between a newspaper's circulation or ownership, in terms of the number of daily newspapers it owns, and its performance of the watchdog role?

This research question tested the notion that there is less watchdog coverage in small newspapers than in large newspapers.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

Ownership of broadcast television was strictly regulated in the United States from the 1920s until the 1980s (Comanie & Gomery, 2000). During former President Ronald Reagan's administration, ownership caps started to increase when the industry was deregulated (Aufderheide, 1999). The Telecommunications Act of 1996 allowed for dramatic deregulation of ownership in the broadcast television industry. It allowed broadcasters to reach 35 percent of the national television markets, giving broadcasters greater powers of concentration and cross-ownership, in which a company owns a television station and a newspaper in the same market (State of the Media 2005 Web site; Aufderheide, 1999). The effect of the Act was that advertising rates and cable prices for consumers increased as broadcast companies started owning more stations (Aufderheide, 1999). The increase in consolidation in the broadcast television industry also caused a decline in the quality and quantity of local television news (Aufderheide, 1999).

Newspaper conglomeration has been a trend in the United States since the early 1900s. But newspaper conglomeration increased even more in the late 1990s. Newspaper chains started aggressively concentrating their papers into tight geographic groups in order to increase profits and cut costs (Bass, 1999). Several studies have shown that newspapers have improved after being purchased by a large chain such as Gannett. Other studies have found that the editorial pages of newspapers stayed the same or actually became more editorially vigorous and critical of mainstream authorities and organizations after being purchased by a large chain (Demers, 1999). However, some studies have found that

newspaper quality has declined after being purchased by a large chain (Lacy & Blanchard, 2003). Media conglomeration is a topic of hot debate. Some scholars believe that when fewer companies own more media outlets, more programs and choices are offered. Other scholars and critics argue that as media conglomeration increases, the quality of the news diminishes and the number of choices decreases.

Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. provides an example of some of the negative aspects of large media conglomerates. First of all, Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. produces several local news casts from one centralized location, so the news really is not local at all. Secondly, the company openly financially supports only Republican candidates, even forcing all of its news stations to run a two-minute conservative commentary called “The Point” daily during the news. Sinclair Broadcasting announced in September 2004 that it would order its affiliates to pre-empt regular news programming and run an anti-Kerry documentary on 60 of its television stations. Did local newspapers in towns with Sinclair stations act as watchdogs and criticize this partisan decision? That is what this study aims to determine.

## Theory

The watchdog theory of the press states that the press should act as the “fourth estate” of the government and protect the citizens from its abuses by exposing them. With roots in Libertarian theory, the watchdog theory of the press has been an ideal since the founding of American newspapers. Examples of the press’s watchdog role are evident in American newspaper history from the Revolutionary War through Operation Iraqi Freedom. Several U.S. Supreme Court justices and many newspaper columnists have

pointed out that the watchdog role of the press is especially important during the time of war. One example is the Pentagon Papers case, in which two *Washington Post* reporters publicized a document revealing American involvement in Vietnam before the U.S. Army entered the war, fostering debate on the war and helping to sway the public's opinion of the war (Ungar, 1990). Recall that the 2004 presidential election occurred during a time of war.

There has been much criticism of the press and its watchdog role. Countless examples can be provided that detail how the press hasn't performed its watchdog duty. In fact, a counter-theory called the guard dog theory of the press has been articulated, suggesting that the media protects groups that have power and influence (Donohue et al, 1995).

This literature review explains the regulation and deregulation of the broadcast television industry in order to provide a background on how a company like Sinclair was able to own 61 television stations and dominate several markets by owning two stations in the same market in the fall of 2004. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 is discussed in detail with an emphasis on the section of the Act that governs broadcast services. The Act increased the number of television stations a single broadcast company can own and allowed a single company to own more than one network in the same market and to own a television station and a newspaper in the same market. The literature review next discusses concentration of ownership in newspapers and presents arguments for and against media conglomeration. It summarizes previous research on the connection between concentration of ownership and the quality of news at newspapers and concentration of ownership and the watchdog role of newspapers. This is relevant because this study determined whether there is a correlation between the number of daily

newspapers a chain owned and its newspaper's coverage of Sinclair when it announced it would run the anti-Kerry documentary weeks before the 2004 presidential election.

The literature review also includes an explanation of the trend of centralized news operations in which news is gathered at a single location and exported to several different stations. This is how Sinclair Broadcasting operates. The Fairness Doctrine is explained to provide background on the principle in broadcast news that both sides of a story should be told. The doctrine was at one point law, but has since been repealed. Hence, Sinclair was not required to give equal time to a pro-Kerry documentary.

Finally, a section on the way the media has monitored itself is included. Previous research is included on the way media has criticized media coverage or exposed ethical lapses. This is important because this study explores the way newspapers, one form of media, fulfilled their watchdog role and exposed an unethical decision by another form of media, broadcasting television stations owned by Sinclair Broadcasting.

### FCC Regulation and Deregulation

During the first 50 years of broadcasting in the United States, U.S. law promoted competition in the broadcast television industry (Price & Weinberg, 1996). The 1934 Communications Act required broadcasters to carry programming provided by others and specifically applied anti-trust laws to the broadcasting industry (Companie & Gomery, 2000). In 1940, the Federal Communications Commission limited the number of broadcast stations a single company could own in the same geographical market for the first time. The limit was set at three stations (Companie & Gomery, 2000). In 1944, NBC petitioned the FCC to allow a limit of seven TV stations to any single owner, and as a

compromise, the FCC increased the TV limit to five stations for a single company. In 1953, the FCC developed concentration rules that sought to achieve diversification of programming by encouraging diversity in ownership (Price & Weinberg, 1996). In 1953 and 1954, the FCC passed rules increasing the number of television stations a single company could own to seven. The United States Supreme Court upheld this final adjustment in 1956 (Price & Weinberg, 1996).

The trend toward large conglomerates began in 1985 during former President Ronald Reagan's administration when the FCC increased the broadcast ownership cap for a single company from seven to 12 stations, or a maximum of 25 percent of the national television audience (Albarran, 2002). In the 1980s and 1990s, several policies limiting ownership of radio and television stations were loosened or lifted completely (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003). FCC regulations that prevented television networks from owning their own programming were lifted in 1993. Next came the Telecommunications Act of 1996, a bill that would dramatically affect concentration of media ownership, especially in radio and broadcast television.

### The Fairness Doctrine

The Fairness Doctrine, passed in 1949, encapsulates a basic principle dating back to the early days of radio that, in the public's interest, broadcasters allow for the presentation of contrasting views. The Doctrine was enforced throughout the FCC's and courts' history until 1985 when the Fairness Doctrine started to unravel (Heins & Morse, 2004). In a 1987 case, *Meredith Corp. v. FCC*, the courts ruled that the FCC did not have to enforce the doctrine, which was not mandated by Congress. The FCC dissolved the

doctrine in August 1987 (Museum of Broadcast Communications Web site). The commission said the doctrine was limiting rather than fostering debate and suggested that because there were already many voices in the media market, the doctrine was unconstitutional. While the elimination of the Fairness Doctrine did not affect the growth of conglomerates, it may have led to a decline in the diversity of voices in the media. After the Fairness Doctrine was eliminated, the FCC retained a rule requiring broadcasters to give people an opportunity to respond to personal attacks by a station (The Argus, 2004). A federal court overturned the rule in 2000 on procedural grounds. As a result, Sinclair Broadcasting was free to run an anti-Kerry documentary without providing pro-Kerry commentary for an equal amount of time.

#### The Telecommunications Act of 1996

Telecommunications subcommittee member Senator Larry Pressler, R-South Carolina, called the Telecommunications Act of 1996 the “most lobbied bill in history” (Carney, 1995). That’s because corporations that were close to exceeding the caps on ownership in television and radio stations lobbied relentlessly to have certain provisions included in the final bill. As Eric Alterman (2003) summed it up,

“When the Republicans took over Congress in 1994, the party leadership invited telecommunications corporate heads to Washington, sat down with them, and asked, ‘What do you want?’ (Bagdikian, 1997). The result, after millions of dollars worth of lobbying bills, was a milestone of deregulation that vastly increased the ability of big media conglomerates to increase (and combine) their market share in almost every medium. This expansion

came, virtually without exception, at the expense of the smaller voices in those markets” (p. 26).

Ironically, then President Bill Clinton originally announced that the Act would protect consumers against monopolies (Clinton, 1996). He said during the signing ceremony that the new law “guarantees the diversity of voices our democracy depends upon” (Clinton 1996). Even more contrary to the actual implications of the Act, former Vice President Al Gore said, “In the interest of promoting diversity of voices and viewpoints that are so important in our democracy, this legislation will prevent undue concentration in television and radio ownership” (Gore, 1996). On the contrary, the Act has done just the opposite.

While lobbying to get the Act passed, broadcasters argued that television audiences were shrinking, which lowered their profits. They argued that “free” broadcasting was a valuable public resource because it was the only electronic medium to reach virtually all American homes. They said that allowing consolidation and cross-ownership would protect broadcast television for those who don’t own or can’t afford cable (Aufderheide, 1999). They also argued that they needed to be able to compete with videocassettes, cable, and direct broadcast satellite. Several non-profits attacked different aspects of the Act. The Consumer Federation of America, the American Association of Retired Persons, and the Consumers Union attacked the cross-ownership provision and other anticompetitive features of the bill because consumer groups believed the measures would adversely affect consumers by increasing prices (Aufderheide, 1999, p. 56). The Media Access Project, the Center for Media Education, the Benton Foundation, and the Taxpayers Assets Project argued strongly against cross-ownership with cable and

broadcast concentration (allowing each company to own more stations and reach a higher percentage of the national television audience) (Aufderheide, 1999). While these non-profit organizations fought the Act and foresaw problems it would create, the media largely ignored the Act or skewed coverage for its own financial benefit. In fact, newspaper chains that owned many television stations and stood to gain from the proposed loosening of TV ownership caps and the proposed cross-ownership rules reported favorably on the proposed changes, with positive consequences outnumbering negative consequence more than two to one (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000).

Clinton signed the Telecommunications Act of 1996 into law on Feb. 8, 1996. It was integrated into the text of the 1934 Communications Act (Aufderheide, 1999). Title II, the section of the Act governing broadcast services, changed the climate for broadcasters and gave them more digital spectrum, greater powers of concentration and cross-ownership and greater security in holding their licenses (Aufderheide, 1999).

The Act changed the number of stations a single broadcast company could own from 12 stations or 25 percent of the national audience to 35 percent of the national audience (Aufderheide, 1999). Senator Ernest Hollings, D-South Carolina, argued against the proposal to expand television ownership caps above 35 percent of the national market. He said owning a share that large of the television market would, “be better than being the president of the United States” (Carney, 1995; Gilens & Hertzman 2000). The Act maintained rules banning ownership of more than one television station in all but the largest markets. In the 50 largest markets, it is now legal for a single company to own more than one TV station or a radio and a TV station. Finally, the Act allowed the ownership of more than one network in the same market and cross-ownership of cable

systems and TV networks, meaning that one company could own network stations and cable stations within the same market (Aufderheide, 1999).

The law gave broadcasters more security in what they valued the most: their license to broadcast. The act virtually guaranteed license renewal, almost completely protecting broadcasters from public scrutiny and from being held accountable as public trustees (Aufderheide, 1999). In fact, the FCC now cannot refuse to renew a license on grounds that the broadcaster does not act as a public trustee. The Act also extended TV licenses from five to eight years and banned competitive renewal proceedings in the first round, meaning that an incumbent's license cannot be challenged unless the FCC has already found the license unfit (Aufderheide, 1999). The Act also requires the FCC to reassess its ownership rules every two years to see if any additional rules can be relaxed or abolished. To summarize, the Act gave substantial new protections to the largest players in both broadcast and cable without requiring any additional public obligation or accountability (Aufderheide, 1999).

Immediately after The Telecommunications Act of 1996 was passed, prices for consumers, advertisers, and purchasers of media systems rose. For example, cable prices increased three times faster than inflation in 1996 and four times faster than inflation in 1998 (Aufderheide, 1999). Broadcast advertising revenues, an indicator of market power created by more concentration of ownership, increased 12 percent in 1996 (Aufderheide, 1999). The Act paved the way for a wave of mega mergers in the late 1990s by reducing the barriers to consolidation, cross-ownership, and vertical integration, which is when a media firm owns companies involved in different stages of the production, distribution and exhibition (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). One example is when a company involved in

distribution or transmission buys a company that produces programming. A more concrete example is Disney, which owns the rights to films, television shows, songs, and brands and also owns its own television network and cable channel (Hesmondhalgh, 2002). The Act “represents the culmination of the trend towards marketisation in U.S. policy” (Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 130). In the months following the Act, there were many mergers and acquisitions of local television stations (State of the Media 2004 Web site). In 1997 alone, TV station deals amounting to \$9.3 billion were recorded (Aufderheide, 1999). Total TV and station sales nearly doubled between 1995 and 1996. By 1998, communications corporations were bigger than ever, but rarely more competitive with each other, although one of the Act’s stated goals was to foster competition (Aufderheide, 1999). Between 1995 and 2003, 10 of the largest TV station owners went from owning 104 stations to owning 299 stations (State of the News Media 2005 Web site).

These changes did not result in broadcasters offering a wide range of information on local issues of public importance (Aufderheide, 1999). In fact, a 1998 study of 40 commercial television stations in five large and small markets found that more than one-third of the stations offered no local news at all. In fact, far less than 1 percent of the programming over a two-week period was devoted to local public affairs (Aufderheide, 1999; Benton Foundation and Media Access Project, 1998). Broadcast ownership also became less ethnically diverse than before the passage of the Act.

#### Proposed Changes to the Telecommunications Act

In June 2003, FCC Chairman Michael Powell proposed changes to the Act that would have further loosened limits on station ownership (State of the Media 2005 Web site). His

proposal included three areas. The first was increasing the ownership cap to allow a single company to reach 45 percent of the market, up from the previous 35 percent cap. The second was to allow a single company to own multiple TV stations in a single market, or in other words, to permit duopoly ownership. At the time of Powell's proposal, the law already allowed duopolies in the largest markets, but his proposal suggested allowing duopolies in all but the smallest markets. Powell's final idea was to allow cross-ownership or to allow a company to own a television station and a newspaper in the same market (State of the Media 2005 Web site).

The public, journalists, and members of citizens' groups protested Powell's proposals for more deregulation (Benjamin, 2004). Newspaper editorials criticized the FCC's generous deregulation, arguing that it had gone too far. Groups from across the political spectrum protested the proposed loosened regulations and opposed the onslaught of media concentration that they believed would ensue. The FCC received 750,000 comments about the proposal, the majority urging the FCC not to relax ownership limits (Benjamin, 2004). A broad coalition of civil rights, labor, religious, and advocacy groups criticized the proposal (Labaton, 2004). Opponents included the conservative National Rifle Association, the liberal Media Access Project, the ACLU, the AFL-CIO, the Parents Television Council, the National Organization for Women, the Family Research Council, and MoveOn.org. (Benjamin, 2004). Opponents, in particular, protested against the increase in the national ownership limit. They argued that networks already had considerable power and shouldn't be given more reach. Another point they made was that an increased cap would lower the quality and quantity of local news programming, arguing that corporate owners wouldn't run as much local news as smaller, local owners

would (Benjamin, 2004).

In response, Powell separated the ownership rules from the debate on local media. He said ownership is about concentration and the antitrust issue, while localism is about content. But opponents disagreed and said the two are linked (Ahrens, 2003). Sen. Byron L. Dorgan, D-North Dakota, introduced a “resolution of disapproval,” a Congressional tool rarely used, to overturn Powell’s proposal. He called Powell’s claim that localism may not be directly related to ownership “nonsense” (Ahrens, 2003). “Localism has everything to do with the concentration of ownership,” Dorgan was quoted as saying in the *Washington Post* (Ahrens, 2003).

Critics argued that the proposed rules would harm local broadcasting by encouraging companies to purchase more television stations and replace local content with network shows (Ahrens, 2003). However, two studies, one done by staff members of the FCC and one completed by Economists, Inc. for Disney, found that network-owned stations broadcast more local news and public affairs programming than affiliates (Benjamin, 2004). Critics challenged the sources of the studies: the FCC itself and a company working for Disney, since Disney itself is a huge media conglomerate. Others argued that higher broadcast reach caps would decrease viewpoint diversity and create unhealthy market power. The public and politicians have continued to show opposition to further deregulation and consolidation (State of the Media 2004 Web site).

The Prometheus Radio Project, a group of low-power radio activists, legally challenged Powell’s proposed rule changes, specifically the ones relating to duopolies and cross-ownership (State of the Media 2005 Web site). A federal appeals court blocked Powell’s new rules in November 2003 while it considered the case. In June 2004, the

court threw out the new rules on duopolies and cross-ownership, arguing that the FCC had not justified them properly. The FCC decided not to go to the Supreme Court with the fight, but the proposed rule changes never went into effect. In January 2004, President George Bush signed a bill into law that changed the ownership cap to 39 percent (State of the Media 2005 Web site).

### Effect of Deregulation

Increasing the number of stations a single company can own changes the relationship between the national networks and their affiliates (Benjamin, 2004). It reduces the ability of local stations to reject network programming. In other words, changes in the ownership affect local affiliates' control in killing television shows because network executives, not managers at local affiliates, are given power to cancel a given television show (Benjamin, 2004). Supporters of loosened FCC regulations question whether limits on ownership violate commercial broadcasters' First Amendment rights. Opponents argue that relaxation of ownership limits diversity in the media and reduces the quality of programming (Gratz, 2005). In response to public concerns about the concentration of media ownership, the regulatory environment may be changing (State of the Media 2005 Web site). The public perceives an imbalance between commercial and public service responsibilities of local broadcasters (State of the Media 2005 Web site). In other words, the public is skeptical about broadcasters performing a genuine public service and instead believe local broadcasters' primary concern is corporate profit. The trend toward consolidation stalled in 2004 because of regulatory confusion and the potential effect on campaign politics.

## Arguments in Favor of Media Conglomerates

Media mergers occur because the media industry has high fixed production and distribution costs, high risk of consumer rejection, and static revenues (Greco, 2000). The same debate about the advantages and disadvantages of all media conglomerations applies to newspaper conglomerations applies to all media conglomerations. Here are some of the specific arguments in favor of media conglomerates.

- Larger companies with more money can afford more resources to produce quality media and improve content.
- Large media conglomerates do not limit the diversity of voices, but rather increase diversity because they offer several formats in order not to compete with themselves, especially in radio.

Paul Farhi (1999) argues that media conglomeration will help companies uphold and defend traditional standards of journalism by improving news content and increasing the diversity of ideas that are presented. Farhi compares the media environment of 1999 to 1974, when three television networks dominated television, cable TV was only used to retransmit network programs to isolated areas, there were few VCRs, and neither Satellite TV nor the Internet existed. By 1999, cable television reached the majority of American households, and VCRs were in 90 percent of homes. Farhi argues that with so many channels, stations and movies, one company can't dominate the media. Audience fragmentation is even becoming a concern to advertisers. Farhi believes that while each media company may own more outlets, they are reaching less of the audience. For example, despite merging ABC, ESPN, the Disney Channel, and several other cable networks in 1996, Disney's television properties reached a lower total number of viewers

in 1999 than they did in 1996 (Farhi, 1999).

Fahri argues that large media conglomerates do not limit the diversity of voices, but rather increase diversity, particularly in radio. His main argument is that conglomeration increases diversity because when there are two competitors, they often choose the most popular formats to generate the largest audience. But if a company owns several radio stations in the same market, instead of having two stations with the same popular format, a company will diversify and use different formats rather than compete with itself. Since 1994, large companies, like Clear Channel Communications, have acquired more radio stations. Farhi explains that in 1994, 4,861 stations ran the two most popular types of music formats: adult contemporary or country music. But by 1999, the number of adult contemporary and country music stations decreased to 4,529 (Farhi, 1999). Farhi argues that the stations diversified, changed formats, and found niches. However, note that the decrease is only a change of 322 stations, or 6.6 percent. He also argues that there was a 42 percent increase in Spanish-language stations from 1994 to 1999 and an increase in non-mainstream music stations from 1994 to 1999, including jazz, classical, gospel, children's, blues, and ethnic music formats like Chinese and Japanese (Fahri, 1999). Also because new technology like the Internet allows many people to share their own opinions on personal Web sites and blogs, more opinions are available in the marketplace of ideas.

#### Arguments Against Media Conglomerates

- Conflicts of interest arise that prevent reporters from objectively covering the news for fear of offending another company owned by the same parent company.
- The bottom line is becoming the most important consideration, and budgets will

be cut to return additional profits to shareholders.

- Large conglomerates have similar political and pro-business interests, and their interests are often reflected in their presentation of news and information (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000).

The conflict of interest between reporting the news and avoiding presenting the parent company in a bad light is a problem. For example, it is unlikely that ABC News would run a story that presents Disney in a negative light when Disney owns ABC. But Fahri argues that when large media conglomerates kill stories because they don't want to make their owners look bad, those same companies are closely watched (1999). He gives the example of when Rupert Murdoch decided to kill a book manuscript in 1998 that criticized the mainland Chinese government while he negotiating with the Chinese on a business deal. The incident was widely reported, and the manuscript was later published by another company (Fahri, 1999).

Large media conglomerates do sometimes cut budgets in order to return the maximum profits to the shareholders. With larger chains owning more media outlets, reporters find it harder to do their jobs because of staffing cuts (McChesney & Nichols, 2003). As McChesney describes it,

“Americans recognize that their media are experiencing digital Walmartization. Like the chain that earns billions but cannot be bothered to pay employee health benefits, major media concerns in the United States brag about their profits to Wall Street but still cry poor when it comes to covering the news that matters to Main Street” (p. 3).

Media critics argue that the corporate control of television news, where the bottom line

is the most important consideration, is dumbing down the news, destroying its integrity, and preventing it from serving the public interest (Barnouw, 1997). The purpose of news is to generate corporate profits (Barnouw, 1997). Starting with CBS News in 1981, the Big Three networks began softening the evening news and diminishing content, and the other networks followed (Barnouw, 1997). They ran more stories on entertainment and other topics that would hold audiences' attention and fewer stories on government and international affairs. CBS closed news bureaus all over the world. Lesley Stahl, CBS's White House correspondent throughout the 1970s and 1980s, said that Van Gordon Sauter, a corporate player at CBS News, forced her to soften up on Ronald Reagan. "Reagan was popular, she was told, and viewers are going to turn us off if we criticized him too much" (Barnouw, 1997, p.41). A 2000 poll by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press and the *Columbia Journalism Review* found that 35 percent of nearly 300 reporters and news executives surveyed said news stories that would hurt the financial interests of the news organization they worked for often or sometimes were not reported (Bettig & Hall, 2003).

It is logical that large conglomerates would present news and information with a pro-business bias. An example would be newspaper coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act. Newspaper chains that owned many television stations and stood to gain from the proposed loosening of TV ownership caps reported the proposed changes as a positive, although the Act would actually decrease competition, reducing consumer choice (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000).

In a democracy like the United States, where most people rely on the mass media for information, scholars argue that it is important that there is diversity in news and

information. The public should be exposed to a wide range of opinions and ideas if meaningful political discourse is to take place (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000). Ownership of newspapers has become more concentrated in terms of the number of entities, like partnerships and legal corporations (Demers, 1999). Critics, including Bagdikian, believe this is proof on its face that there has been a loss of diversity in the marketplace of ideas. He argues that the concentration of newspaper ownership could, in fact, stifle the exercise of the First Amendment.

“What is truly worrisome about the concentration of press ownership in relatively few corporations is that this situation tends to put a lock on meaningful press freedom. In the days of the founders, it was relatively simple and inexpensive to start and sustain a paper; now, however, it is difficult and costly. How much more difficult and expensive it will be to buck an entrenched corporation remains to be seen. Monopolies are never easy to budge, and I suspect that monopoly power, as exemplified in corporate control, does not bode well for press freedom” (Bagdikian, 2004).

### Conglomeration of Newspapers

In the 1880s, the cost of newer, faster presses and typesetters plus a host of new advertisers brought about economies of scale that allowed newspapers to be sold at lower prices to a mass audience (Companie & Gomery, 2000). E.W. Scripps started his chain in the late 1880s, and there were eight major newspaper chains by the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The number of group owners and the number of newspapers they controlled steadily increased from 1910 to 1980. From 1920 to 1998, the number of daily

newspapers published in the United States decreased from 2,042 to 1,489 (Busterna, 1988; Lacy & Simon, 1997; Comanie & Gomery, 2000). As the number of daily newspapers in the United States decreased, the percentage of newspapers owned by groups increased from 7.5 percent in 1920 to 69.9 percent in 1986 (Busterna, 1988; Lacy & Simon, 1997). By 1997, 120 groups owned 77 percent of all daily newspapers in the United States, with 81 percent of daily circulation and 87 percent of Sunday circulation (Morton, 1997; Lacy & Simon, 1997). In 1960, nearly 70 percent of daily newspapers in the United States were independently owned, but by the early 1990s, the number had declined to 25 percent (Matthews, 1996). By 2004, the 21 largest daily newspaper groups, or those with a combined daily circulation of 500,000 or more, controlled 68 percent of the daily newspaper circulation in the United States and 73 percent of the Sunday circulation (State of the Media 2006 Web site). The top 10 groups controlled 54 percent of daily newspaper circulation in the United States and 58 percent of Sunday newspaper circulation (State of the Media 2006 Web site). But in the last several years, the trend of newspaper consolidation has started to reverse. Large, publicly traded companies, like Knight Ridder and Tribune came apart, and more than 10 percent of the industry moved back into private ownership (State of the Media 2009 Web site). In 2008, many papers were for sale but could not find buyers, including the *San Diego Union-Tribune*, the *Portland Press Herald* and the *Austin American-Statesman*, which were taken off of the market because no buyers could be found (State of the Media 2009 Web site).

Starting with Dow Jones in 1967 and continuing through the mid-1990s, more than a dozen newspaper companies changed from private to public ownership (State of the

Media 2005 Web site). Companies began using Wall Street profits to purchase more newspapers, rather than spending the money to improve their products or increase readership. The newspaper industry has traditionally been considered one of the least concentrated media segments. At the end of World War II, 80 percent of daily newspapers in the United States were independently owned, but by 1989, 80 percent were owned by corporate chains (Bagdikian, 1997). About 63 million newspapers were sold each weekday in 1970 when there were 63 million households (Bagdikian, 2004). But by 2002, about 56 million newspapers were sold each weekday, although there were 106 million households. Within the last generation, nearly half of the afternoon daily newspaper in large cities have died or merged with a morning paper (Bagdikian, 2004).

In the late 1990s, newspaper chains became more aggressive at concentrating their holdings into tight geographic groups (Bass, 1999). Companies like Thomson, Knight Ridder, Cox, Media General, Hollinger, Gannett, Donrey, and MediaNews started to trade properties quickly in order to increase profits and cut costs, selling papers that didn't fit their geographic strategies. Changing trends in retail advertising and tax laws helped prompt the mass trading (Bass, 1999). Scholars have pointed out that while this geographic concentration has obvious economic advantages, the journalistic implications and impact to readers could be negative. In fact, one scholar found that clustering was correlated with reduced newsroom spending (Martin, 2001). One obvious drawback of this geographical concentration is that it reduces competition and diversity of journalistic voices (Bass, 1999). By 2000, chains began purchasing other sizeable chains, rather than simply buying single newspapers. In January 2005, Lee Enterprises acquired Pulitzer Inc.'s 14 daily newspapers for \$1.5 billion, including *the St. Louis Post-Dispatch* and *the*

*Arizona Daily Star*. By the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, 99.9 of daily newspapers were a monopoly in their cities (Bagdakian, 2004).

A debate remains as to whether newspaper conglomeration is helping or harming the quality of news, and research on the topic has produced mixed results. The debate will likely continue for some time because choosing the criteria to judge the quality of a newspaper is, to some extent, subjective. In fact, simply determining if a newspaper's news hole has increased or decreased depends on the criteria used for measurement. For example, is the news hole determined by the amount of local or wire stories? Is the amount of news judged by the number of stories, the number of column inches, or the number of words? There is on-going debate as to whether concentration of ownership in newspapers improves or diminishes their quality, and studies on the affects of conglomeration of newspapers have had mixed results. The main arguments in favor of conglomeration of ownership in newspapers include:

- Corporate newspapers are more profitable than independently owned papers and have more resources. They have better marketing and advertising departments and can provide more money to purchase better equipment for reporters and hire additional reporters, which will improve quality (Demers, 1996).
- Editor and managers at corporate newspapers are less concerned about profits because they do not have to worry about meeting the payroll because large companies have large enough budgets to meet it (Companie, 2000).
- Because corporately owned newspapers have fewer ties to the community, reporters and editors are more likely to act as the public's watchdog and hold professional norms and values to a higher standard (Companie, 2000).

Corporately-owned newspapers are also at a greater distance from political pressure, and editors know that if they offend local authorities, they will still have a job or can move to another newspaper within the same chain.

The main arguments opposed to conglomeration of ownership in newspapers include:

- Newspapers owned by large companies that own many papers will be more interested in appeasing shareholders and make financial decisions to boost profits while neglecting the quality of the news stories (Picard, 2004).
- Newspapers owned by large chains will run more wire copy and less local copy, which will reduce both the quality and quantity of newspapers' editorial pages. Local editorials may also be emphasized less than before group ownership. The overall news hole often decreases after a newspaper changes from independent to chain ownership (Litman & Bridges 1986).

Revisiting the idea that corporate newspapers are more profitable and have more resources and will use them to improve newspapers' editorial pages, scholars have noted that in some cases, newspaper and reporters are given additional resources after a newspaper is purchased by a large chain, and the news content at those newspapers often improves. For example, after Cox purchased *the Greenville Daily Reflector* in North Carolina in 1995, its computer system was updated and it started getting Washington coverage of its congressional delegation for the first time (Bass, 1999). Another example is when MediaNews purchased *the San-Mateo County Times* in 1996 in California. The paper started running nearly twice as many pages as before and became more competitive

with other regional papers.

David Demers (1999) argues that as newspapers become more corporate, they try harder to produce a quality product. Demers explains that corporate newspapers are more profitable than independently owned newspapers because they benefit from economies of scale, and they place more emphasis on product quality than other newspapers. Demers quoted Gerald Stone, who explained the role of economics in newspaper publishing (1999):

“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 economies of scale. Evidence is that this financial planning sophistication can make newspapers more profitable businesses without debasing the journalistic product.”

Research on New England daily newspapers found that large group ownership and quality of press performance were positively correlated (Coulson, 1994; Becker, Beam & Russial, 1978). Two case studies of Gannett newspapers in Florida and Arkansas found that the papers had in-depth coverage of local news. Coulson and Hansen found that after *the Louisville Courier Journal* was sold to Gannett in 1986, the amount of space in the newspaper devoted to non-advertising content increased substantially (Companie & Gomery, 2000). While stories were slightly shorter, there were many more stories. The number of hard news and feature stories increased and the number of local news stories increased by 30 percent (Companie & Gomery, 2000).

In his 1996 review of 17 studies on chain versus independent newspapers, Demers found few differences in editorial page content between chain and non-chain newspapers (Companie & Gomery, 2000). Of the 17 studies, he found seven that showed that chain newspapers were more editorially vigorous (more critical of the local power structure and gave the editorial staff more freedom) than independently-owned newspapers, six showed no difference, and three suggested that independent newspapers were more vigorous (Demers, 1999).

Addressing the issue of editors and publishers at corporate newspapers being concerned about profit, research suggests editors of independent papers are more likely to be concerned about profit than group editors (Coulson, 1994; Olien, Tichenor, & Donohue, 1988). In fact, in one study, journalists at newspapers owned by chains were no more likely than their independent colleagues to state that profit seeking adversely affected news coverage and the diversity of information their newspapers published (Coulson, 1994). Although publishers of corporate newspapers may be pressured to meet shareholders' profit goals, local managers do not have to be concerned about meeting the weekly payroll because larger conglomerations have big enough budgets to meet it (Companie, 2000).

Supporting the third main argument in favor of conglomeration of newspapers, Demers' questionnaire of editors and reporters at 223 newspapers concluded that corporate newspapers publish more staff-generated editorials and letters to the editor that are critical of the status quo and of mainstream groups because they are more insulated from local political pressures. In fact, Demers' study found highly corporate newspapers publish twice as many editorials that are critical of mainstream groups than independent

newspapers (Demers, 1996). As Demers explains it,

“The owners and managers of corporate newspapers are less likely to grow up in the community their newspaper serves; are more likely to work at the newspaper for a shorter period of time; are oriented to the larger corporation, not the local community; and are more heavily influenced by professional norms and values, which place a higher premium on truth and criticism than on local parochial interests” (Demers, 1996, p .870).

### Studies on the Negative Effects of Newspaper Conglomeration

While some research shows concentration of ownership improves editorial content at newspapers, there is also much research that shows that concentration of ownership harms the quality of editorial content at newspapers. Some research indicates that when a newspaper is purchased by a large conglomerate, its focus shifts away from quality investigative reporting to the bottom line, often in order to generate more profit for shareholders. Absentee control by large newspaper groups may shift the focus at newspapers from editorial quality to profit (Coulson & Hansen, 1995). For example, when MediaNews bought Long Beach’s Press-Telegram in 1997, newsroom salaries were slashed, and half of the seasoned staff left (Bass, 1999). After purchasing the Monterey County Herald, MediaNews cut staff and refused to recognize the existing Newspaper Guild contract. In fact, 22 reporters lost their jobs (Heyboer & Durocher, 1997). In their study of 77 American dailies between 25,000 and 100,000 circulation, Lacy and Blanchard (2003) found that public ownership of newspapers and higher profits were associated with smaller newsroom staff. Cranberg, Bezanson, and Soloski (2001)

present a list of effects of public ownership on newspaper performance. They argue that, “For public companies (with but few exceptions), the business of news is business, not news. Their papers are managed and controlled for financial performance, not news quality.”

Miles Maguire (2005) did a content analysis of *the Oshkosh Northwestern* newspaper in Oshkosh, Wis., and analyzed content from 1996 to 2002. The paper was family owned in 1996, sold to Ogden Newspapers in May 1998, sold to Thomson Corp. in July 1998, and purchased by Gannett in July 2000. His study determined that the overall quantity of news published, as measured by the number of individual articles, was greatest while the newspaper was owned by the family chain and least while owned by Gannett, the national chain (Maguire, 2005). The paper’s quality decreased as it went from family to national chain ownership. By the time the paper was owned by Gannett in 2002, the number of local section stories had been nearly cut in half, and the number of stores with a local focus was down by nearly 40 percent (Maguire, 2005). After purchase by Ogden, the number of enterprise stories (or stories that are started in-house with an eye toward investigative or watchdog journalism) the paper ran declined and so did the number of stories aimed at holding powerful institutions accountable (Maguire, 2005). After Gannett purchased the paper, the percentage of stories that were aimed at holding powerful institutions accountable increased, but the number of enterprise stories decreased. Maguire concludes that, contrary to Demers’ findings, ownership and ownership structure are indeed associated with changes in the quality and quantity of news coverage. However, Maguire’s content analysis looked at only one newspaper.

Some studies have found differences between the news hole sizes in independent- and

corporate-owned newspapers. Litman and Bridges' 1986 study found that as the number of newspapers in a group increased, the number of lines of news content decreased. A study of Minnesota newspapers found that corporate newspapers with headquarters outside the state had less coverage of local news than group or independent papers with headquarters inside the state (Coulson, 1994).

Hallock (2004) analyzed *the Louisville Courier-Journal* before and after its sale to Gannett in 1986. While the paper's editorial ideology changed little under Gannett ownership, its editorial pages did not run local editorials at the top of the page as often as before the sale. The study found that the paper's editorial frequency changed little after the sale. The paper published about three editorials a day during both periods studied (Hallock, 2004). However, the editorials became an average of 23 percent shorter after purchase. Another change was that Gannett closed Louisville's afternoon newspaper, the *Times*, which had been aimed at a blue-collar audience of readers and offered more editorials devoted to local metropolitan issues. When Gannett merged *the Times* with *the Courier-Journal*, there was no effort by *the Courier* to increase its editorial coverage to compensate for the closing of *the Times* (Hallock, 2004). The closing of *the Times* removed a strong, local editorial voice from the Louisville daily newspaper market. In a separate study, Coulson (1994) found that journalists at independent newspapers more often rated their papers' commitment to quality local coverage as excellent and were more likely than journalists at group-owned newspapers to strongly agree that their newspapers provided an appropriate amount of local coverage.

Picard (2004) argues that market concerns determine operation and content in the newspaper industry. Newspapers are becoming more focused on economic pressures,

which has affected journalistic quality and produced practices that diminish the social value of newspapers. Newspapers are more concerned with exploiting readers to gain advertising revenue than serving them. As Picard states, “It should not be surprising that the public increasingly sees the press as just another business that is more concerned with its own economic interests than with broader interests of those it purports to serve” (2004, p.1). There are several reasons some publishers have made commercial considerations equal to or more important than editorial quality and social concerns (Picard, 2004), including stagnant markets, increasing competition from other media for audience, use by an increasingly smaller percentage of the population, and changes in advertiser media choices. However, it also needs to be noted that newspapers received two-and-a-half times more income from advertising in 2000 as in 1950, even after accounting for inflation (Picard, 2004).

#### Arguments Against Concentration of Ownership in Television Stations

The public is tuning out local television news. In 1998, 64 percent of the public told the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press that they regularly watched local television news. Just a decade later, by 2008, that number had fallen to 52 percent (State of the Media 2009 Web site). Concentration of ownership has caused a decline in the quality of local television news content. In recent years, although local stations added more news programming, they didn’t increase their staffs enough, which resulted in there being more local news on the air, but with less content, meaning that they filled in the gaps with press releases and entertainment stories, rather than more local news stories (State of the Media 2005 Web site). Concentration of ownership led to more debt, which

was taken out of station budgets. Local television stations relied more on feed material and date book stories, or stories about pre-scheduled events, like press conferences, trials, and hearings (State of the Media 2005 Web site). In recent years, station owners started adding new news programming to stations' schedules, but now it appears to be leveling off. From 2003 to 2006, the average number of hours of news per weekday increased from 3.7 to 4.1 hours, and it remained at a steady 4.1 hours in 2007 (State of the Media 2009 Web site). The majority of news directors reported that they did not increase news programming in 2008.

Efficiency has become the driving force in determining what is broadcast as news (State of the Media 2005 Web site). One trend in broadcast news is called "centralcasting," or cutting costs by producing newscasts in one location that air in several cities (State of the Media 2004 Web site). Sinclair has been criticized because of its highly centralized news operations (Jensen, 2004). Sinclair's "News Central" beams localized weather and sports segments from its headquarters in Maryland to stations around the United States (State of the Media 2004 Web site). It produces programs at its headquarters that are designed to look like local news. It also produces national and international news, national sports, graphics, and weather segments (Sinclair Action Web site). A company executive told the trade magazine *TV Week* that full implementation of the centralized news cast would cut the company's local news costs in half (State of the Media 2004 Web site). In 2004, Sinclair's news franchise included 37 of its 61 stations, which aired local news in 31 markets. In 2009, it owns 58 television stations in 35 markets that reach 22 percent of U.S. households (Sinclair Broadcasting Web site).

Sinclair's news operation shapes the tone and content of the evening news at every

local station. It requires every affiliate to air “Truth, Lies and Red Tape,” which gives examples of government waste mixed with conservative commentary (Klinenberg, 2005). Local news is the most lucrative part of the business and accounts for one-third of advertising revenue (Klinenberg, 2005). In addition to centralcasting, Sinclair increases profits by cutting news staffs at its local affiliates to as few as 15, compared to as many as 80 at other stations (Klinenberg, 2005). Digital-transition could lead to an elimination of local stations in much of the country, particularly if the FCC allows higher ownership limits in the future (State of the Media 2004 Web site). Network programming could be transmitted exclusively by cable, eliminating the job of the affiliate (State of the Media 2004 Web site).

#### Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc.

Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. presents a unique example of the danger of media consolidation because of its right-wing agenda that are openly expressed and sometimes disguised as news (Jensen, 2004). It is also unusual because of its centralized newscasts. Finally, Sinclair Broadcast Group aggressively purchased many stations and fought the FCC ownership cap rules. Sinclair executives even used a scheme to spread ownership out within the chief executive officer’s family to allow the company to own more stations (Klinenberg, 2005).

Activists have promised to challenge Sinclair’s station licenses as they come up for renewal by the FCC. Sinclair’s attempt to air the partisan documentary may have done it more harm than good by drawing attention to the company’s anti-regulatory activities (State of the Media 2005 Web site). The anti-Kerry documentary was titled, “Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal,” and attacked Kerry’s activism against the Vietnam

War and featured former POWs accusing Kerry, a Navy veteran and war protester, of making their ordeal worse by prolonging the war (Jensen, 2004). It was not the broadcaster's announcement to air the documentary that upset many critics the most. Several newspapers ran editorials about Sinclair's reach (Gratz, 2005). For example, Frank Blethen, owner of the Seattle Times, wrote in an editorial,

“It is great that this has energized comment and debate, but the real issue is not that Sinclair is doing this ... it is that they are allowed to control 62 stations. That's not only obscene public policy; it's dangerous to the survival of democracy. It wouldn't matter what Sinclair says and does if they were just one viewpoint in a wide variety of voices. The crisis is that we don't have the necessary variety of voices to sustain a democracy” (Gratz, 2005).

Sinclair Broadcast Group made headlines in April 2004, when it ordered seven of its stations not to air an ABC News “Nightline,” program in which Ted Koppel read the names of American soldiers killed in Iraq (Rosenberg, 2004). The program featured the names and pictures of more than 700 American troops (Jensen, 2004). Sinclair said the program was a political statement disguised as news content.

Sinclair has a conservative slant (Jensen, 2004). It airs a two-minute conservative editorial segment called “The Point” daily on its 61 affiliate stations at the same time as the local news (Tabor, 2005). During The Point, company vice president Mark Hyman speaks out against the “angry left” and “clueless academia” (Klinenberg, 2005). The segment is weaved into the local aspects of the news broadcasts. Sinclair also sent a team of reporters to Iraq to report only positive news about the war. A former producer at Sinclair told *Rolling Stone* magazine that he was not allowed to report any bad news

about the Iraq War and had to leave out reports about dead soldiers and the cost of the war (Klinenberg, 2005). Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. also forced all of its stations to broadcast a pledge of support for former President George W. Bush (Klinenberg, 2005).

## Watchdog Theory of the Press

### The Watchdog Concept

The watchdog theory of the press asserts that the press should criticize and evaluate the government and other institutions to ensure they don't become corrupt or overstep their power (Lichtenberg, 1990). The main idea of watchdog theory of the press is that the press should protect citizens from the abuses of the government or other powerful people or institutions (Glowaki, 2003). A free press is able to perform its democratic role of providing useful information to voters to encourage public debate (Lichtenberg, 1990). Because the basic role of government is to protect liberty, a watchdog is needed to guard against deviations from that role (Lichtenberg, 1990). Alexander Meiklejohn argues that citizens in a democracy, as the ultimate decision makers, need a wide range of information to make intelligent political decisions. He believes the press serves as the people's watchdog, criticizing and evaluating the established power of government (Lichtenberg, 1990; Meiklejohn, 1960). Newspapers names like Sentinel, Monitor, Inquirer, Examiner, Observer, Intelligencer, and Advocate seem to come right from the fourth estate press ideology (Donohue et al., 1995). The idea is that media acts as a fourth estate of government, while the first three estates of government are its branches: the legislative, judicial, and executive branches. The fourth estate watchdog perspective advocates the idea of an autonomous media that represents the interests of the populace

and not of the dominant groups (Donohue et al., 1995). Media theorists argue whether or not the press functions as a watchdog, an arm of society's elite, or an intermediary between the two (Stone et al., 1997).

### Libertarian Theory

The watchdog theory of the press has its roots in the Libertarian theory of a free press, which includes three basic assumptions: the importance of the individual, the reliance on powers of reasoning, and the concept of natural rights, of which freedom of religion, speech, and press became a part (Siebert, 1956). The central idea of the theory is that people want to know the truth and that the only method of arriving at the truth is the free competition of opinions in the marketplace of ideas. The final assumption is that the most rational idea or opinion will emerge and be generally accepted (Becker, 1945). In other words, a free press is necessary to give citizens the information they need to make informed voting decisions (Glowaki, 2003).

Libertarian theory includes two main ideas of the press's responsibility: the press should inform the public and act as a watchdog of democracy by ensuring that government officials do not overstep their boundaries or impinge on people's natural rights (Siebert et al., 1956). The Libertarian theory of the press and the watchdog concept both contain the idea that it is the press's right and duty to serve as an extralegal check on government (Siebert et al., 1956). In fact, according to Siebert (1956),

“The press was to keep officers of the state from abusing or exceeding their authority. It was to be the watchdog over the workings of democracy, ever vigilant to spot and expose any arbitrary or authoritarian practice. And to fulfill

this function adequately, the press had to be completely free from control or domination by those elements which it was to guard against” (p.56).

While Libertarian theory is rooted in ancient times, it was greatly expanded during the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Siebert et al., 1956), and it changed from adhering to authoritarian to libertarian principles. Three Englishmen and one American made major contributions toward this change: John Milton in the 17<sup>th</sup> century; John Erskine and Thomas Jefferson in the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and John Stuart Mill in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Siebert et al., 1956). Milton wrote in favor of intellectual freedom, arguing that people can distinguish between right and wrong if exposed to the ideas and thoughts of others. His theory later developed into the contemporary concepts of the “open marketplace of ideas” and the “self-righting process,” meaning that in a free marketplace of ideas without government control, the truth will eventually emerge and false ideas will die out (Siebert et al., 1956). Thomas Jefferson argued that while an individual could make bad judgments, groups would inevitably make sound decisions. Jefferson articulated the watchdog concept when he argued that in order for a democracy to perform properly, the press should be free from control by the state. He even proclaimed that a government that cannot stand up to criticism deserved to fall (Siebert et al., 1956). John Stuart Mill argued for the importance of the individual’s freedom of expression, believing that opinions should be expressed, challenged, and defended in order to arrive at the truth (Siebert et al., 1956). Libertarian theorists believe that out of a multiplicity of voices in the press, while some false information will reach the public, the government does not have the right to restrict information. If it did, it would likely restrict information that was critical of itself (Siebert et al., 1956).

Libertarian theory has most often been criticized because it advocates unrestricted freedom of expression, which needs to be balanced against other rights, like individual privacy rights, and especially national security (Glowaki, 2003). The solution, in societies that recognize press freedom, has often been to not allow the government prior restraint to censor the press, but to leave the press responsible to the law for any consequences of what it publishes, especially if it infringes on national security, other individual rights, or “legitimate claims of society” (McQuail, 2000, p. 129). Another criticism of Libertarian theory is that it talks about press rights but not press responsibilities. Social Responsibility came largely to replace Libertarian theory. Social Responsibility theory calls for the press to use its resources in an ethical and responsible manner (Dennis & Merrill, 1996).

#### History of the Press’s Watchdog Role

One of the oldest basic principles of journalism, the watchdog theory originated with Edmund Burke’s 17<sup>th</sup> century announcement that the press had become a Third Estate in England’s Parliament (Stone et al., 1997). In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a group of letters written in England that pushed the idea of a free press, called Cato’s letters, were reprinted and read widely in colonial America, influencing the American Revolution (Stone et al., 1997; Levy, 1985; Emery & Emery, 1978). Cato’s letters expressed the press’s obligation and right to engage in political criticism, condemn public measures that harm the people, and expose corruption of government officials (Levy, 1985, p. 117). The letters led to the American idea of the press as a “fourth estate,” a watchdog of government on behalf of the people (Levy, 1985).

During the Revolutionary War, the American press regularly called attention to tyranny and abuses of the British government, and newspapers established themselves as legitimate voices against abusive government powers (Altschull, 1990). Although debate continues as to whether the authors of the Bill of Rights wanted the First Amendment to serve as a guarantee of the press's power to watch over the government, the colonial press was a vigorous watchdog of political forces, and the press was already acting as a strong watchdog by the turn of the century (Stone et al., 1997; Powe, 1991; Emery & Emery, 1978). As early as 1805, a newspaper publisher argued that his duty to the public justified publication of a libelous story in *the New York Evening Post* (Gleason, 1990; p. 61). Starting in the 1830s with the creation of the penny press (Mott, 1962, p.220) and lasting through the 1870s, newspapers expanded their watchdog role from patrolling the government to uncovering problems within other powerful institutions (Stone et al., 1997; Dicken-Garcia, 1989). The penny presses were the first American newspapers with large readerships, and most penny press editors saw their role as fulfilling a duty to provide the news and expose abuses, rather than serve a political party or mercantile class (Dicken-Garcia, 1989, p. 106). Yellow journalism began in the 1890s, and it is considered the birth of American newspaper reform, which included exposing government corruption (Stone et al., 1997; Kobre, 1964). The watchdog press of this era exposed notorious scandals, including the Whiskey Ring, in which a group of American whiskey distillers bribed government officials in order to defraud the federal government of taxes (Encyclopedia Britannica Web site). The press also exposed the purchasing of Congressional votes for the Union Pacific Railway (Stone et. al., 1997; Stein, 1974; Mott, 1962).

The muckraking years from about 1900 to 1912 are considered the “zenith in the press’s exercise of its watchdog role” because the press clearly intended to inspire action against excesses and corruption at all levels of power (Stone et al., 1997; Chalmers, 1974). The muckrakers often went searching for corruption and found it. They intended to present the facts detailing abuses of powers and inspire action against the corruption they uncovered (Stone et al., 1997). The most famous example was Upton Sinclair’s 1906 book, “The Jungle,” which described the dangerous and unsanitary conditions of food packing plants (Emery & Emery, 1978). While the book was a work of fiction, it was accurate in the way it portrayed the food packing plants (Miraldi, 1990). Popular magazines began investigating the government and industry. McClure’s magazine printed Ida Tarbell’s History of the Standard Oil Company in 1904, exposing J.D. Rockefeller’s ruthless business and labor practices (Emery & Emery, 1978). The important watchdog element of the muckraking years was that writers believed that the public would correct society’s ills once the press alerted the public of them (Grenier, 1960).

Prominent U.S. Supreme Court decisions made during the 1970s strengthened the power of the watchdog press. Some of that happened in cases involving national security and their implications in coverage of the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the Pentagon Papers (Stone et al., 1997). The press performed its watchdog role by uncovering hidden facts about the Vietnam War in the Pentagon Papers case. The papers were a classified Defense Department history of the American role in southeast Asia that indicated that the government had lied about its involvement with Vietnam (Ungar, 1990). A Vietnam History Task Force produced 7,000 pages in 47 volumes of documents explaining how America became involved in the Vietnam War (Powe, 1991, p. 97). The *New York Times*

and the *Washington Post* both reported some of the findings in the documents. The case became a U.S. Supreme Court precedent that the government cannot exercise prior restraint and prevent newspapers from printing classified information, unless imminent harm to national security is proven. The government had argued that additional publication of information about the Pentagon Papers should be prevented because of serious injury to foreign relations and national defense (Powe, 1991, p. 100). But the court's majority opinion explained that any prior restraint carries a heavy burden of proof and the government had not presented enough evidence to justify a prior restraint (Powe, 1991, p. 102). While the Supreme Court could have perhaps decided whether free press or national security always takes precedence, *New York Times* leaders were afraid they would lose the case and instead asked the court to rule on the narrower question of whether the government had justified prior restraint in that specific instance.

Watergate is a prime example of the press acting as a watchdog, not single-handedly bringing down the President Richard Nixon, but sounding the alarm for the public to scrutinize him (Schudson, 1992). *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein dug deep into Nixon's role in the burglary of the National Democratic headquarters in the Watergate Complex and the cover up before the election of 1972 (Emery & Emery, 1978). The rest of the press, however, didn't start covering the story until January and February of 1973. Some argue this points to a limited role of the press as a watchdog during the 1970s (Emery & Emery, 1978).

### Criticism of the Press as Watchdog

While the watchdog function of the press is one of the oldest and most revered

principles in journalism, it has recently come under scrutiny. Scholars have suggested that the public has become disillusioned with the media and no longer supports its watchdog role (Stone et al., 1997). Schudson (1992) argues that the media's coverage of the Watergate scandal doesn't prove the watchdog power of the press because it was one newspaper, not the press as an institution, acting as a watchdog. He also argues that Congress, the courts and the FBI helped the press, which perhaps had a partisan ax to grind because many journalists disliked Nixon (Schudson, 1992).

Critics also argue that since Watergate, the press has not lived up to its watchdog reputation. Francke (1995) names several factors that decrease the effectiveness of the press's watchdog role. They include conflicts between professional norms, sales, ratings, profits, news values, and partisanship. Critics argue that the watchdog press didn't do its job during the cold war. Bob Giles (2001) summarizes it nicely: "During the cold war, this nation paid a heavy price for secrecy and deception used to justify military actions and for a pliant press willing to censor itself or unwilling to challenge the official version of events" (p. 3). Another example is the mainstream media's coverage of the AIDS epidemic. United States media did not start aggressively covering the AIDS epidemic until after it had killed more than 12,000 people and had been spreading for six years (Kinsella, 1989). While the networks started to censor less sexual content because of budget cuts and competition with cable, which ran more risqué programming, the networks ignored the news of the spread of AIDS. Weeks after "Saturday Night Live" ran a parody of men chatting that they were free to say the word "penis" on the air, networks refused to run advertisements for condoms, one way to help prevent the spread of HIV, the virus that causes AIDS (Kinsella, 1989, p. 4). Other issues that the media

largely ignored in the 1980s included the savings and loan disaster and the Iran-Contra affair (Glowaki, 2003). As Stanley Cohen (1989) put it, “The S&L Lobby, which exploited loopholes in federal laws and regulations, had the government in the palm of its hands, and the press watchdogs barely managed a whimper” (p. 22). Instead of running stories about embattled investors and depositors on the front page, they were often buried on the financial and business pages (Cohen, 1989).

One explanation of the press’s weak watchdog role in the 1980s was former President Ronald Reagan’s relationship with the press corp. Because Reagan often made off-the-cuff remarks, reporters were only allowed to ask him questions at formal press conferences (Kurtz, 1996). Reporters had assigned seats and had to sit quietly until they were called upon, instead of standing and shouting to compete for the president’s attention the old-fashioned way (Kurtz, 1996, p.189). Reagan used his charm and charisma to woo the press, turning them from watchdogs into lapdogs (Kurtz, 1996). Because Reagan was so popular, the press was reluctant to criticize him for fear of being ridiculed. Reagan was even called the “Teflon president” because he was popular despite media scrutiny. His approval ratings actually increased when the press criticized him (Kurtz, 1996).

In comparison, however, during former President Bill Clinton’s term, the press relentlessly investigated his alleged improprieties, including Whitewater, Monica Lewinsky, “Troopergate,” and “Travelgate” (Glowaki, 2003).

Saldana (2001) argues that “the Fourth Estate, the check on government, has become instead its flack” (p. 31). Saldana states that after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the press became a war cheerleader and abandoned its watchdog role, becoming

instead, “a hound at heel” (p. 35). He sums up the need for the press to be a watchdog on government, especially in times of war:

“Given the history of ethnic and political intolerance this country has shown in troubled times ...this is no time for the media to take a power. This is precisely the time when it should be holding the government’s feet to the fire, demanding answers to hard questions” (Saldana, 2001, p.35).

Bob Giles (2001) also argues that during times of national crisis, the press should be particularly watchful of the government, closely scrutinizing facts about the military and foreign policy that the government wants to hide from Americans.

Additional support of the idea that newspapers may be abandoning their watchdog roles is that there are fewer pressrooms in Washington D.C., and reporters are no longer scrutinizing government spending (Fleeson, 2001). In fact, reporters who try to cover federal beats by writing policy watching, procedural stories don’t get rewarded (Fleeson, 2001). Their stories are often buried in the newspaper while more sensational stories are placed on page one.

### Guard Dog Theory of the Press

As observers began weighing whether the media have served as a watchdog, some scholars have advanced a guard dog theory of the press, in contrast to the watchdog theory. Donohue, Tichenor, and Olien (1995) defined the guard dog metaphor as suggesting that “media perform as a sentry not for the community as a whole, but for those particular groups who have the power and influence to create and control their own security systems” (p. 115). The guard dog approach rejects the idea of media being

separate from the system and assumes that media reflect the interests of dominant groups. It also assumes that the watchdog role of the media is fundamentally unrealistic because there is rarely one single public interest, but several organized interests that vary in power (Donohue et al, 1995). According to the theory, in a highly homogeneous community, the press always protects and maintains the local power establishment (Donohue et al., 1995, p. 116). The press also rarely reports conflict, avoids investigative reporting, and raises alarms only in unusual circumstances. “In the consensus atmosphere, the media are sleeping guard dogs” (Donohue et al., 1995, p. 116). Part of the guard dog theory is that in small towns, when different local groups have conflicting interests, the media are more likely to express the views of the more powerful groups (Donohue et at., 1995). The guard dog theory of the press extends to national media as well. In reporting foreign affairs, American media tends to present crises in a framework consistent with U.S. foreign policy (Chang, 1989; Donohue et at., 1995). Further evidence of this is the *New York Times*’ and *Washington Post*’s apologies for their coverage of the Iraq War and lack of questioning of former President George W. Bush’s claim that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (The New York Times, 2004).

Another view that is in direct conflict with the watchdog theory is the lapdog theory, an extreme version of the guard dog theory, which holds that media are little more than lapdogs (Times Mirror Corporation, 1986; Donohue et. al., 1995). The lapdog view argues that the press is completely submissive to authority, lacks independent power, is oblivious to interests except for powerful groups, and frames all issues to the perspectives of the highest powers in the system (Donohue et al., 1995). The guard dog view differs from the lapdog view in that the former assumes a conflict role for media. In the lapdog

view, during conflict, the media always defend the powerful against outside intruders, but in the guard dog view, conflicts between dominant powers and outsiders would be reported from both sides.

#### Watchdog Theory and the Press Monitoring Itself

Many recent media scandals have been reported by the media itself (Fengler, 2003). Examples include when reporters at the *Boston Phoenix* helped expose Mike Barnicle and Patricia Smith for plagiarizing and inventing quotes for the *Boston Globe*. A local competitor caught *the Los Angeles Times* when it entered into a profit-sharing deal with one of the subjects of its reports, the sports center “Staples Arena.” *The Los Angeles Times* reacted by publishing a lengthy article about the problem (Fengler, 2003). Another example of a newspaper reporting on its own mistakes is when the *New York Times* published long articles after Jayson Blair was caught making up quotes and interviews.

There has, however, been limited research conducted on the role of the media as a watchdog of itself. Some content analyses have examined how the news media covered its own coverage of specific events, like war or political campaigns (Fengler, 2003). A 1983 study found that most news media, except for the *Washington Post*, avoid criticizing themselves (Robinson, 1983). But media criticize each other. For example, print media criticize broadcast media, while national organizations criticize local ones (Robinson, 1983).

Media outlets have done a poor job covering how media conglomeration, specifically mergers and acquisitions, affect media consumers. *Time* and *CNN* presented the merger of their parent companies in terms of the consequences for the stock market, but ignored

the deal's other implications (Pieper & Hughes, 1997). Other media, including *the Washington Post* and *the Nation*, questioned the implications of the deal for the independence of *Time* and *CNN* newsrooms (Pieper & Hughes, 1997). Fengler studied 30 leading media reporters and media critics in the United States to find out how much they scrutinize the failings of colleagues and bosses, whether they address a general audience or an audience of media professionals or both, and if they believe media reporting and criticism acts as a media accountability system. The study included in-depth interviews with the journalists. Many of them admitted that their employers' business interests might influence the way they cover the problem of media concentration (Fengler, 2003).

Writers from smaller publications that were not owned by large conglomerates seemed more eager to write about the issue of ownership and the consequence of large group ownership, such as a lack of diversity of ideas and voices in the media (Fengler, 2003).

Overall, Fengler's (2003) interviews with media critics and media writers showed that they had a high degree of peer orientation and considered the implications of their work on fellow journalists more than they might when covering politicians or businesspeople. She concluded that additional research is required to determine whether journalists apply the same ethical standards to other journalists as they do to representatives of other social groups. The media writers and critics said that while they had an impact on other journalists, they doubted they had any influence on media owners and media managers or the media business in general (Fengler, 2003). Few believed they could help improve reporting by holding the media accountable. Fengler points out in her conclusion that long-time prejudices about a "conspiracy of silence" among media professionals can no longer be considered valid. She argues that the media reporting and criticism in the new

media emerged from the media boom of the 1900s as a growing media accountability system in the United States, and media reporters and critics might become more confident in their “watchdog roles” once they become more established in the news media (2003).

Jaemin Jung (2002) studied how media covers media conglomeration by examining how the most popular magazines in the United States covered three mergers. Not surprisingly, his findings suggest that *Time* and *Fortune* gave favorable coverage of their parent company in terms of direction of coverage of the merger, emphasis on the company, and the amount of coverage (Jung, 2002). In other words, magazines involved in mergers covered them more positively than other magazines did. The study focused on Time Inc.’s three merger cases: the merger of Time Inc. and Warner Communications Inc. in 1989; the merger of Time Warner Inc. and Turner Broadcasting System, Inc. in 1995; and the merger of AOL and Time Warner in 2000. Coverage of these mergers was studied in *Time* (owned by AOL Time Warner), *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report* and three business magazines: *Fortune* (owned by AOL Time Warner), *Business Week*, and *The Economist* (Jung, 2002). Jung noted that Jason McManus, the editor-in-chief of Time Inc.’s magazines, decided not to cover the Time Warner merger announcement in 1989, although it was covered by *The New York Times* and *Newsweek* (Jung, 2002). The study supports the idea that media ownership may have influenced the content of both *Time* and *Fortune* (Jung, 2002). Gilens and Hertzman (2000) studied newspaper coverage of the 1996 Telecommunications Act and found that coverage of the Act was often influenced by the financial interests of the newspaper’s corporate owners. Their study found that newspaper chains that owned many television stations and stood to gain from the proposed loosening of TV ownership caps and the proposed cross-ownership rules

reported favorably on the proposed changes, with positive consequences outnumbering negative consequence more than two to one (Gilens & Hertzman, 2000). While there has been little research examining media's watchdog role on itself, it appears that overall, the media may not be doing an adequate job monitoring itself.

To summarize this chapter, regulation of ownership in broadcast television has changed drastically since the inception of television. Especially since the 1980s, the industry has been dramatically deregulated. Chains are allowed to own many television stations and own television stations in markets where they own newspapers. Sinclair Broadcasting is one such prominent company. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 allowed for even more deregulation of the industry, increasing the number of stations a single broadcast company could own and the percentage of the market it could reach.

Research has found varying evidence of how chain ownership affects the quality of media outlets. Some research supports the idea that large chains improve newspapers after purchase, but other research finds that large chains cut staff, and the overall impact on the newspapers' editorial pages is negative. Since new research continues to present varying conclusions, the debate will probably continue for some time.

Building from the Libertarian theory of ancient times, 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup>, and 18<sup>th</sup> century scholars articulated the principles of allowing intellectual freedom and the "self-righting process," meaning that when all ideas are allowed to be presented, the truth will eventually emerge and false ideas will die out. The watchdog role of the press has its roots in Libertarian theory. From the days of the yellow journalism to the 21st century newsroom, newspapers have been protecting the public from overzealous powerful leaders and institutions. The press, to some degree, has also acted as a watchdog of itself.

Newspapers police broadcast stations and media critics offer their opinions. There have been criticisms of Watchdog Theory and there is debate as to whether the American press truly is a watchdog, particularly since the presidency of Reagan. For example, after the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, the press became a cheerleader for a war in Iraq, abandoning its watchdog role (Saldana 2001). Also, there are fewer pressrooms in Washington D.C. today than decades ago (Fleeson, 2001).

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

This study employed content analysis to determine whether daily newspapers served the watchdog function when they reported on Sinclair Broadcasting's plans to run the anti-Kerry documentary, "Stolen Honor," prior to the November 2004 presidential election. The Sinclair group's plans for "Stolen Honor" were announced on Sept. 24, 2004 and it announced that it would run the documentary on Oct. 22, 13 days before the Nov. 4 election. After significant press coverage and debate, Sinclair stations ran a modified version of the documentary on Oct. 19 titled "A POW Story: Politics, Pressure and the Media."

If local newspapers were performing their watchdog function and reporting on the questionable practices of other news media, including local television stations, namely Sinclair Broadcasting stations, local newspapers would have covered the national media controversy by running stories that mentioned the local Sinclair broadcast outlets.

Local daily newspapers in cities with Sinclair Broadcasting television stations were examined to determine the extent of their coverage of the controversy. In the fall of 2004, Sinclair Broadcasting owned 61 television stations located in 41 different cities. *Editor & Publisher International Yearbook* was used to identify the largest daily newspaper in each of the 41 cities in which one or more Sinclair stations existed in the fall of 2004. The largest daily in a station's city was examined because the larger paper, with greater resources than marginal papers, is more likely to cover a national controversy involving a local broadcast outlet (Demers, 1999, p. 86). In addition, most markets only have one daily newspaper. In the limited number of markets with joint operating agreements, the

newspaper with the larger circulation was examined. If the circulation was equal, a newspaper was chosen at random. One newspaper from each city was chosen so no city was overrepresented. News stories, editorials, and columns about Sinclair running the “Stolen Honor” documentary were located using Lexis-Nexis, the individual newspapers’ on-line archives, the NewsLibrary.com database, and if these aren’t available for a specific newspaper, the newspapers’ archivist was contacted. Maria E. Len-Rios and Qi Qiu (2007) used similar criteria for choosing the articles they examined in their study of negative articles’ prediction of the reluctance of a clinical trial. They examined news stories, features, briefs, and editorials.

The search utilized the key phrases, “Sinclair,” “Sinclair Broadcasting,” “Stolen Honor,” and the separate words “Kerry” and “documentary” to identify newspaper items during the 46 days from Sept. 22, 2004, two days before the decision on “Stolen Honor” was announced, to Nov. 6, 2004, two days after the presidential election. Three types of content about the controversy were measured: news stories, editorials and columns.

The watchdog theory of the press asserts that the press should protect its citizens from the abuses of government and powerful institutions by criticizing and evaluating them to ensure that they don’t become corrupt or abuse their power (Lichtenberg, 1990). In fact, a free press should perform its democratic role of providing useful information to voters to encourage public debate (Lichtenberg, 1990). For this study, in order for the press to be performing its watchdog role, daily newspapers in towns that contained Sinclair Broadcasting television stations should have covered the announcement that Sinclair planned to air the partisan documentary on the local station. In addition, in order for the newspapers to truly be performing their watchdog roles, the tone of coverage should have

included criticism of Sinclair Broadcasting's decision.

The watchdog function is supported when local newspapers (a) publish news stories about the Sinclair controversy, (b) publish long news items about the controversy as measured by a word count, (c) publish stories about Sinclair in which the local TV station is mentioned, (d) publish various local opinion pieces such as editorials and columns and (e) publish editorials and columns that criticize Sinclair. Columns or guest commentaries generally appear on the editorial or op-ed pages and include a byline, while editorials appear in the editorial column of the editorial page and do not include a byline. These variables together measure the strength of a newspaper's watchdog function.

Specifically, the following standards were used to determine what constitutes watchdog coverage for each measure: (a) If 80 percent of the newspapers published stories covering the Sinclair controversy overall, that constituted an overall watchdog effect: (b) if newspapers published long news items about the controversy as measured by a word count - a short story was defined as 399 words or fewer, a medium sized story was defined as 400 to 699 words, and a long story was defined as 700 words or longer (c) if 70 percent of the newspaper items mentioned the local Sinclair television stations, that also constituted watchdog coverage, (d) if at least 10 percent of the items were either editorials and columns, that indicated a watchdog effect and (e) if more than 50 percent of the stories, columns, and editorials were critical of Sinclair Broadcasting in the context of the controversy, that also indicated a watchdog effect.

Maria E. Len-Rios and Qi Qiu (2007) measured story length by word count and further categorized it on a scale from 1 to 6, where: 1=stories of 1 to 500 words; 2=stories of 501-1,000 words; 3=stories of 1,001 to 1,500 words; 4=stories of 1,501-3,000 words; and

5=stories of 3,001 words or more. However, their study examined only articles from *The New York Times* and from *The Washington Post*, which tend to run much longer stories than smaller metropolitan daily newspapers that are not considered national newspapers.

The study's dependent variable is watchdog role and it is measured in an index by the following variables:

**Sinclair Mention** - percentage of newspapers and the number of news items that mentioned the Sinclair group in relation to the "Stolen Honor" program.

**Local Sinclair Mention** - percentage of newspapers and the number of stories, editorials and columns that mentioned the local television station that is owned by Sinclair Broadcasting in relation to the controversy about the "Stolen Honor" show. In Jaemin Jung's study (2002), stories were selected based on whether they mentioned either one of two media companies involved in a merger. Hopson's study (2005) also examined mention by recording whether stories mentioned voter registration or not. Alison A. Plessinger and Jeanne S. Criswell's study (2006) of the results of the purchase of the Indianapolis Star differentiated between local, regional, national, and international coverage in stories.

**Local Stories** – Percentage of newspapers and the number of stories written by local staff writers, as opposed to wire services. Miles Maguire measured the number of reporters who were writing local stories for his study of how ownership change affected the quality of a Wisconsin newspaper (2005). Coulsen and Hansen (1995) recorded the ratio of staff written copy to wire service copy in their study of the changes in *the Louisville Courier-Journal's* news content after purchase by Gannet.

**Tone of Coverage** – Determines whether the newspaper story, column, or editorial's overall tone was negative, neutral, or positive based on an analysis of individual paragraphs (Jung, 2002). Len-Rios and Qiu (2007) also determined the overall tone of the stories in their study by determining if each sentence was negative, neutral, or positive, and the total (2007). Each paragraph was coded as positive, neutral, or negative in regard to Sinclair. The number of positive and negative paragraphs was compared, and if there were more of one than the other, the article was determined to be either positive or negative. If there are equal numbers of positive or negative paragraphs, then the article was determined to be neutral. For this study, if more than 50 percent of the stories, columns, and editorials are negative, or critical of Sinclair Broadcasting, a watchdog effect was indicated.

As an example, the following ideas, were categorized as negative coverage of Sinclair: Reports of advertisers threatening to take or taking commercials off of the air on Sinclair stations; Reports of Sinclair not running ABC's "Nightline" on May 1, 2004, in which Ted Koppel read the names of American soldiers killed in Iraq; Reports of Sinclair labeling the documentary as news; Reports of Sinclair's directive following Sept. 11, 2001 that news anchors at all local stations run editorials announcing support for the Bush administration's response; and Reports of Sinclair's political contributions to Republicans.

**Coverage Length** - the mean number of words devoted by newspapers to stories, columns and editorials about the national Sinclair group and/or the local TV station. Coulsen and Hansen (1995) and Jung (2002) both recorded the length of stories in their studies. Other published studies have measured length by word count (Len-Rios & Qiu,

2007). Steve Hallock (2004) measured the length of editorials in terms of number of words in his study of the Louisville newspaper after purchase by Gannett. (Note that length alone does not indicate that the newspaper performed its watchdog role because newspapers could publish long, laudatory stories.)

**Placement** - Did the story appear on the front page, a section front, or somewhere else inside the newspaper? Newspapers are not performing a strong watchdog role if they bury the stories on the Sinclair controversy in the back of the newspaper. Placement is an important element in political and election coverage (Scheufele, 2000). Len-Rios and Qiu (2007) measured prominence by a story's presence on the front page of the newspaper or front page of a section. For this study, the placement variable was ranked. It was recorded whether each article was on the front page, a section front, or elsewhere inside the newspaper. Glowaki (2003) measured placement by coding whether the story appeared on the front page of the newspaper, on the first page of a section, on an inside page of the first section, or somewhere else inside the paper. In newspapers, the most important items appear on the front page, the next most prominent run on a section front, and then on an inside page (McKinnon et al, 1996).

**Circulation Size and Newspaper Ownership** are this study's main independent variables because they were compared to an index of various measures of the newspapers' watchdog role. In a multiple regression equation, it was determined what type of effect they had upon the independent variable, the watchdog index.

**Circulation Size** – Circulation was rounded off to the nearest 1,000.

**Newspaper Ownership** – The number of daily newspapers each chain owns was recorded in order to accurately reflect the magnitude and concentration of the news

organization.

The following seven research questions were explored.

1.) How many news items (news stories, columns, and editorials) were published by each paper?

2.) What was the placement of the news items published by the newspapers?

3.) What percentage of the news stories, columns, and editorials published about Sinclair Broadcasting and the Stolen Honor controversy mentioned the local Sinclair station?

4.) What was the tone of the news stories, columns, and editorials? In other words, what percentage of those news stories, columns, and editorials were positive, neutral and negative in regard to Sinclair Broadcasting in the context of the controversy?

5.) What was the mean number of words for news stories and opinion items (editorials and columns) published by the newspapers overall?

6.) Was there a relationship between a newspaper's circulation or ownership, in terms of the number of daily newspapers it owns, and its performance of the watchdog role? This research question tested the notion that there is less watchdog coverage in small newspapers than in large newspapers.

A multiple regressions was used to assess the nature of the linear relationship between the independent variables and the dependent variable (Riffe et al., 1998). It indicated which measures the independent variables, newspaper ownership and circulation, if any, accounted for part of the variation in the dependent variable, watchdog role index.

The focus of the content analysis was the 41 dailies in the Sinclair cities. The unit of analysis was news items that mention Sinclair Broadcasting's running of the "Stolen

Honor” documentary. Each news item was coded, so coding was done at the story level. Three categories of content were examined: (1) news stories which generally appear on the news pages and report on the most recent developments of the issue, (2) columns or guest commentaries which appear on the editorial or op-ed pages and include a byline, and (3) editorials which appear in the editorial column of the editorial page and do not include a byline.

The statistical package, Statistical Program for the Social Sciences version 16.0, was used to run frequencies, Pearson’s correlations, and multiple regressions. Data answered the seven research questions.

#### Pilot Study to Test Intercoder Reliability

The author and one independent coder conducted the coding of the newspaper articles. Prior to testing the coding instructions, the independent coder was briefed on the purpose of the study, the coding process, categories, and definitions. The pilot study offered a chance to refine the coding process, categories, and definitions.

Cohen’s *Kappa* was used to assess reliability for the local television station mention variable, since it was measured at the nominal level. Cohen’s *Kappa* assumes nominal level data and has a normal range from .00 agreement at chance level to 1, perfect agreement and a value of less than .00 indicating agreement less than chance. The conceptual formula for determining Cohen’s *Kappa* is:

$$Kappa = \frac{PA_0 - PA_E}{1 - PA_E}$$

with  $PA_0$  signifying percent of observed agreement and  $PA_E$  meaning percent of expected agreement (Neuendorf 2002).

Spearman's *rho* was used for the rank order variables, including item type, placement, tone, and byline. It assumes rank order data (Neuendorf, 2002).

$$\text{Spearman's } rho = 1 - \frac{D \sum (d^2)}{n^3 - n}$$

where D = the number of discrepancies in coding units, d = each coding discrepancy (one coder's ranking – the other coder's ranking), and n= the number of units coded in common by coders.

For the variables at the interval and ratio level, including circulation size, ownership and length, Pearson's correlation coefficient, which assesses the linear correlation between two sets of interval or ratio numbers, was used. The conceptual formula for Pearson's correlation coefficient is:

$$r_{ab} = \frac{\sum \text{of } ab}{\sqrt{(\sum a^2) (\sum \text{of } b^2)}}$$

where a = each deviation score (coder A score minus mean for A), and b = each deviation score (coder B score minus mean for B)

The above formula is the ratio between the covariance of A and B's deviation scores and the product of their individual variances.

A pilot test was performed to test the coding sheet and intercoder reliability for slightly more than 10 percent of the sample (or 20 articles out of 175 total). Intercoder reliability was checked for the two coders by running the correct statistical test for each variable using the Statistical Program for the Social Sciences version 16.0. The tests yielded the following reliabilities for each variable in the study (Table 1).

Table 1

*Coefficients for Pilot Test Coding*


---

Variable	Coefficient	Statistic
Circulation size (ratio) correlation	1.0	Pearson
Ownership (ratio) correlation	1.0	Pearson
Item type (rank) rho	.92	Spearman's
Placement (rank) rho	.95	Spearman's
Length (ratio) correlation	1.0	Pearson
Local Television Station (nominal) Kappa	.95	Cohen's
Tone (rank) rho	.81	Spearman's
Byline (rank) rho	.91	Spearman's

---

After examining the pilot study, the coding instructions were tweaked for several

variables. For determining if an article is a story, column, or editorial, columns were defined as bylined opinion pieces while editorials were defined as opinion pieces that do not include bylines. The instructions on the placement variable were reviewed with one of the coders to make sure she understood that the three categories were front page, other section front or inside. On the variable for local television station, the instructions were tweaked so that even if a news story, column, or editorial mentioned the station at all, be it by just the network, like Fox for example, or the call letters, that would be coded as mentioning the local station.

For the tone variable, the directions for coding were modified. Each paragraph was coded as positive, neutral, or negative. The number of positive and negative paragraphs were compared, and if there were more of one than the other, the article was determined to be either positive or negative. If there were equal numbers of positive or negative paragraphs, then the article was determined to be neutral. For the byline variable, the categories were changed to just two categories, one to indicate if a local writer wrote the story and another to indicate whether it was a wire service. If a local writer and wire service helped write the story, it was coded as a local writer because this study was simply trying to measure whether or not a local newspaper writer gave attention to the controversy. In addition, there were several samples in that pilot study that did not include a byline at all or included a byline indicating that the item was written by a local writer who used information from a wire service. Items that simply said “staff reports” were recorded as local stories. Items that did not include a byline were coded as local stories because local editorials generally do not include a byline.

After these changes were made to the coding directions, the intercoder reliability

should improve. However, the results from the pilot tests are reasonable. There is little agreement among scholars as to what constitutes an acceptable level of intercoder reliability. However, Neuendorf (2002) concluded that reliability coefficients of .90 or higher would be acceptable to all situations, while coefficients of .80 or higher would be acceptable in most situations. For reliability coefficients lower than .80, there is great disagreement. Banerjee, Capozzoli, McSweeney, and Sinha (1999) proposed the following criteria for Cohen's Kappa: .75 indicated excellent agreement beyond chance; .40 to .75 indicates fair to good agreement beyond chance; and below .40, poor agreement beyond chance. All of the variables except for tone had reliability greater than .90. Local television station was the only variable that used Cohen's *Kappa* as the statistical test, and it ranked as excellent agreement at .95. Tone had the lowest intercoder reliability at .81 as it is a variable that is determined in a more subjective way than the others, but a reliability of .81 is greater than .80 and, therefore, still acceptable. The reliability (ranging from .81 to 1.0) of the variables measured in this study was adequate to continue the study as planned.

## CHAPTER 4

## RESULTS

This chapter summarizes the results of the statistical analysis used to analyze coverage of the Sinclair Stolen Honor controversy in the 41 newspapers in cities that had television stations owned by Sinclair from September 22, 2004 to November 6, 2004.

This study found that 38 out of the 41 newspapers in cities that had Sinclair Broadcasting television stations during the fall of 2004 (or 92.7 percent) ran a total of 175 news items covering the controversy of Sinclair Broadcasting's announcement to run the Stolen Honor documentary. Of those 175 news items, 107 were news stories, 43 were signed columns and 25 were unsigned opinions pieces, or editorials. Most of these items ran on the inside of the paper (73.1 percent), while 13.1 percent ran on the front page, and 13.7 percent ran on a section front. The average newspaper ran 4.3 news items (stories, columns, or editorials) on the controversy, and each item was an average of 626.3 words long. Individual newspapers' mean word counts for items about the Sinclair controversy varied from 0 to 1082 words. Only three newspaper in the entire population (or 7.3 percent) ignored the controversy completely. *The Huntsville Times*, *The Birmingham News* and *The Indianapolis Star*. *The Huntsville Times*, with a circulation of 55,000 at the time of the controversy, and *The Birmingham News*, with a circulation then of 146,000, were both owned by Advance Publications, Inc., a chain that owns 19 daily newspapers. *The Indianapolis Star*, with a circulation in 2004 of 253,000, was the largest paper to not cover the issue in its pages. It was also the only Gannett newspaper not to cover the controversy. Nine newspapers overall ran seven or more news items covering the controversy. They included *The Tallahassee Democrat*, which ran seven; *The News-*

*Gazette* (in Champaign, Illinois), with eight; *The Sun* (in Baltimore, Maryland), with 25; *The Asheville Citizen Times* (in North Carolina), with seven; *The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, with ten; *The Richmond Times-Dispatch* (in Virginia), with nine; *the Charleston Daily Mail* (in West Virginia), with eleven; and the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, with nine.

*The Sun* in Baltimore, Maryland, a Tribune Co. newspaper that had a circulation of 257,000 at the time of the controversy, ran the most news items covering the issue, a total of 25 items overall. Sinclair Broadcasting's corporate offices are located in Baltimore, so it's not surprising that the paper vigorously covered the controversy. It ran fifteen stories, two columns, and eight editorials covering the Sinclair and the Stolen Honor documentary.

The first portion of this chapter lists frequency counts and percentages of news stories, columns and editorials that the 41 daily newspapers in the population ran. It also lists frequencies for Placement, Local Sinclair Mention, Tone, and the Mean Number of Words the newspapers reported on the controversy in news stories, columns, editorials and all items. The rest of the chapter summarizes the statistical results for testing the research questions using two-tailed Pearson product-moment correlation tests and multiple linear regressions.

## Descriptive Statistics

Table 2

*Frequencies of News Items*


---

<u>Type</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
News stories	107	61.1
Columns	43	24.6
Editorials	25	14.3

	<u>Number of Newspapers</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
0 items	3	7.3
1-5 items	29	70.3
6-10 items	6	14.6
11-15 items	2	4.9
15-25 items	1	2.4

---

\*A chart (appendix B) lists each newspaper and the number of news stories, columns, and editorials it ran.

Table 2 lists the results to answer research question one, which asked: How many news items (news stories, columns, and editorials) were published by each paper? The majority of the newspaper coverage, 61.1 percent, was through news stories, but nearly one-fourth, or 24.6 percent of the items coded were columns and 14.3 percent were editorials. Nearly half of the newspapers in the population studied, or 20, published at

least one editorial about the controversy. This is particularly relevant because almost half of the newspapers felt the controversy was compelling enough to justify running an editorial.

Only three of the 41 newspapers in the study, or 7.3 percent, ignored the Stolen Honor controversy completely. On the other hand, 9 newspapers, or 22.0 percent of the population, ran six or more news items covering the controversy.

In regards to overall coverage of Sinclair Broadcasting and the Stolen Honor controversy, it appears that the newspapers as a population did fulfill a watchdog function since more than 80 percent of the newspapers published news items covering the controversy. In fact, 92.7 percent of the newspapers covered the situation. Also, 38.9 percent of the news items were editorials or columns, and in the methodology, standards were set that if at least 10 percent of the items the newspapers published were editorials or columns, that would indicate a watchdog effect.

Table 3

*Frequencies of Placement*

---

<u>Placement</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Front page	23	13.1
Other Section Front	24	13.7
Inside	128	73.1

---

Table 3 answers research question two, which asked: What the placement was of the news items published by the newspapers? More than one-fourth, or 26.8 percent, of the news items in the population appeared either on the front page of the newspaper or on a section front. The newspapers felt that the Sinclair controversy was important enough to give the stories prominent placement more than a quarter of the time. Also, editorials and columns generally run on the inside of the opinion section, so when accounting for just the 108 news stories, 42 of them, or 38.8 percent ran either on the front page or on a section front. And 25 of the 108 news stories, or 23.1 percent, ran on the front page. This suggests a watchdog effect.

Table 4

*Frequencies of Sinclair Mention*


---

<u>Sinclair Mention</u>	<u>Number of Stories</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Did mention	127	72.6
Did not mention	48	27.4

---

Table 4 answers research question three, which asked: What percentage of the news stories, columns and editorials published about Sinclair Broadcasting and the Stolen Honor controversy mentioned the local Sinclair station? Of the 175 items published, 127 of them, or 72.6 percent, mentioned the local Sinclair television station, putting the controversy in context for the local readers. One of the standards to determine an overall

watchdog effect was that if 70 percent of the newspaper items mentioned the local Sinclair stations, that constituted watchdog coverage. So, examining just the variable Sinclair mention, the newspapers overall were performing a watchdog role. This is significant because a strong majority (more than 70 percent) added a local element to their coverage of Sinclair Broadcasting's plan to air the anti-Kerry documentary by mentioning the local Sinclair television station.

Table 5

*Frequencies of Tone*


---

<u>Tone</u>	<u>Number of News Items Overall</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Positive	15	8.6
Negative	138	78.9
Neutral	22	12.6
<u>Tone</u>	<u>Number of News Stories</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Positive	6	5.6
Negative	84	78.5
Neutral	17	15.9
<u>Tone</u>	<u>Number of Columns</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Positive	7	16.3
Negative	32	74.4
Neutral	4	9.3

Table 5 (Continued)

<u>Tone</u>	<u>Number of Editorials</u>	<u>Percentages</u>
Positive	2	8.0
Negative	22	88.0
Neutral	1	4.0

---

Table 5 answers research question four, which addressed the tone of the news stories, columns, and editorials. Overall, 138 of the 175, or 78.9 percent, of the news items that covered the controversy had a negative tone in the context of the controversy, 12.6 had a neutral tone and 8.6 percent had a positive tone. And 74.4 percent, or nearly three-fourths, of the columns had a negative tone. Of the editorials, or unsigned opinion pieces that ran on the editorial page and indicated the overall view of the newspaper, a staggering 88 percent had a negative tone in regard to Sinclair. This indicates that the newspapers were indeed fulfilling their watchdog role. In the methodology, a standard was set that if more than 50 percent of the stories, columns, and editorials were critical of Sinclair in the context of the controversy, a watchdog effect was indicated.

Table 6

*Mean Numbers of Words in Coverage*


---

News Stories	Editorials	Columns	All Items
601.1	575.2	718.4	626.3

---

\*The mean number of words for news stories and opinion items for each newspaper are included in a chart (Appendix B).

Table 6 addresses research question five, which asked: What was the mean number of words for news stories and opinion items (editorials and columns) published by the newspapers? The mean for editorials, news stories and all items are considered medium length, as they are all between 400 and 699 words, which was the definition of medium sized stories in the methodology. But the mean length for columns was 718.4 words, which fits into the methodology's definition of a long story, which was 700 words or longer. The coverage length, especially in the columns, helps to constitute watchdog coverage by the newspapers of the Sinclair controversy.

A correlation between circulation and length and then a multiple regression was used to answer research question six, which asked if there was a relationship between a newspaper's circulation or ownership and its performance of the watchdog role.

Table 7

*Correlation Between Watchdog Index and Circulation*

---

		Circulation	Watchdog Index
Circulation	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.032
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.338

Table 7 (Continued)

	N	175	175
Watchdog Index	Pearson Correlation	.032	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.338	
	N	175	175

---

A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine if there is a relationship between the watchdog index and circulation. The correlation (.032) is not significant at the .05 level in this one-tailed test. This test determined that there is no correlation between the watchdog index (which measured how each newspaper covered the Sinclair Broadcasting controversy) and a newspaper's circulation.

Table 8

*Correlation Between Watchdog Index and Ownership*

---

		Watchdog Index	Ownership
Watchdog Index	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.043
	Sig. (1-tailed)		.288
	N	175	175
Ownership	Pearson Correlation	-.043	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.288	
	N	175	175

---

A Pearson product-moment correlation was used to determine if there is a relationship between watchdog index and ownership. The correlation (-.043) is not significant at the .05 level in this one-tailed test. This test determined that there is no correlation between the watchdog index (which measured how each newspaper covered the Sinclair Broadcasting controversy) and a newspaper's ownership. The trend is toward a negative relationship. If the results were significant, it would mean that smaller newspapers tend to be more likely to perform their watchdog role, but the results are not significant.

A multiple regression determined whether or not the independent variables newspaper circulation and ownership influenced a newspaper's performance of the watchdog role, which was measured by the dependent variable, the watchdog index.

Table 9

*Multiple Regression Between Independent Variables and the Watchdog Index*

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<i>R</i>	.046
<i>R square</i>	.002
<i>Adjusted R square</i>	-.009

Table 9 (Continued)

Standard Error of the Estimate	1.17012
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Table 9 (Continued)

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	<i>F</i>	Sig.
Regression	.501	2	.250	.183	.833
Residual	235.499	172	1.369		
Total	236.000	174			

## Coefficients

Variable	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig
(Constant)	3.395	.222		15.305	.000
Circulation	2.323E-7	.000	.019	.229	.819
Ownership	-.001	.003	-.036	-.438	.662

The predictor variables circulation and ownership were entered into a simultaneous regression model predicting the watchdog role index (a ranked measure from 0 to 5 of the variables added together, including Local TV Station Mention, Byline, Tone, Length, and Placement. Each story is ranked 0 to 5 based on the criteria it met.) The results, shown in Table 8, indicate that the model was not significant. *F* value is .183,  $p = .833 > .05$ . The R-square value indicates that only 2.0 percent of the variance in the watchdog index (measured by the five variables Local Station Mention, Byline, Tone, Length, and Placement) was explained by the circulation and ownership. The standardized beta for circulation is .019, and the standardized beta for the ownership is -

.036. These results suggest that larger newspapers tended to run more watchdog stories as did chains with fewer newspapers. However, these relationships were not significant.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses the implications of the results presented in Chapter 4. First, the newspapers' overall performance of their watchdog role is discussed. Then the results of the research questions are discussed, along with possible explanations. These results are also compared with other scholars' findings. Next, theoretical and research implications of the study are examined. Finally, limitations of the study are reviewed, and suggestions are made for future directions in research on newspapers' watchdog role.

#### The Newspapers' Overall Performance of the Watchdog Role

The newspapers in this study met all of the standards set up in the methodology that constitute watchdog coverage. More than 80 percent of the newspapers (92.7 percent of them) published news items covering the controversy, serving as a check on media power, possibly contributing to Sinclair's final decision to run a modified version of the documentary. The mean length for editorials, news stories and all items were considered medium length, as they were all between 400 and 699 words, which fit in the definition of medium sized stories. But the mean length for columns was 718.4 words, which fits into the methodology's definition of a long story, which is 700 words or longer. The coverage length, especially in the columns, helps to constitute watchdog coverage by the newspapers on the Sinclair controversy. If 70 percent of the news items mentioned the local Sinclair station, that also contributed to a watchdog effect. In fact, 72.6 percent of the news items mentioned the local station, putting the controversy in context for local readers. Another measure that indicated a watchdog effect was if at least 10 percent of the

items were either editorials or columns. In fact, of the 175 news items in the population, 43 of them (24.6 percent) were columns and 25 (14.3 percent) were editorials. Finally, if more than half of the news had a tone critical of Sinclair Broadcasting in the context of the controversy, that indicated a watchdog effect. Indeed, 138 of the news items overall (78.9 percent) had a critical tone, indicating a watchdog effect. The placement of the news stories also supports a watchdog effect. Out of all of the news items, 47 percent of them ran on either the front page or a section front, indicating that almost half of these items had a prominent placement in the paper.

#### Findings of the Research Questions

Research question one asked how many news items (news stories, columns, and editorials) were published by each paper. The majority of the newspaper coverage, 61.1 percent, was through news stories, but nearly one-fourth, or 24.6 percent of the items coded were columns, and 14.3 percent were editorials. Nearly half of the newspapers in the population studied, or 20, published at least one editorial about the controversy, which is particularly relevant because almost half of the newspapers felt the controversy was compelling enough to justify running an editorial. Only three of the 41 newspapers in the study, or 7.3 percent, ignored the Stolen Honor controversy completely. On the other hand, 9 newspapers, or 22.0 percent of the population, ran six or more news items covering the controversy. The newspapers did a thorough job covering the controversy in terms of the actual number of news stories, columns and editorials they ran on the subject.

Research question two asked what the placement was of the news items published by

the newspapers. More than one-fourth, or 26.8 percent, of the news items in the population appeared either on the front page of the newspaper or on a section front. This shows that the newspapers found the Sinclair Stolen Honor controversy to be particularly newsworthy if that many of them put them on the front page or on a section front. Editorials and columns generally run on the inside of the opinion section, so when accounting for just the 108 news stories, 42 of them, or 38.8 percent ran either on the front page or on an inside page. And 25 of the 108 news stories, or 23.1 percent, ran on the front page.

Research question three asked what percentage of the news stories, columns and editorials published about Sinclair Broadcasting and the Stolen Honor controversy mentioned the local Sinclair station. Of the 175 items published, 127 of them, or 72.6 percent, mentioned the local Sinclair television station, putting the controversy in context for the local readers. This shows that newspapers wanted their readers to know that those local stations were planning to do something that may have been ethically questionable.

Research question four asked what the tone of the news stories, columns and editorials was. Overall, 138 of the 175, or 78.9 percent, of the news items that covered the controversy had a negative tone in regard to Sinclair in the context of the controversy. This is a staggeringly high percentage and shows that newspapers were doing their watchdog role, criticizing Sinclair Broadcasting and bringing their questionable plan to light right before the 2004 election.

Research question five asked about the mean number of words for news items published by the newspapers. The mean for all items, 626.3, was considered medium, or between 400 and 699 words. But the mean length for columns was 718.4 words, which

fits into the methodology's definition of a long story, which was 700 words or longer. Newspapers were running longer, columns that were more often negative in tone, which indicates a strong watchdog role.

Research question six asked if there was a correlation between a newspaper's circulation or ownership, in terms of the number of daily newspapers it owns, and its performance of the watchdog role.

Most research suggest that larger newspapers have more resources and are able to better report local news or better localize national news stories. This study did not find a significant correlation between newspapers' performance of the watchdog role and their circulation.

Research on how newspaper ownership affects the quality of newspaper coverage, however, is mixed.

The main arguments that chain ownership harms a newspaper's watchdog role are:

- Newspapers owned by large companies that own many papers will be more interested in appeasing shareholders and make financial decisions to boost profits while neglecting the quality of the news stories (Picard, 2004).
- Newspapers owned by large chains will run more wire copy and less local copy, which will reduce both the quality and quantity of newspapers' editorial pages. Local editorials may also be emphasized less than before group ownership. The overall news hole often decreases after a newspaper changes from independent to chain ownership (Litman & Bridges 1986).

In fact, some studies suggest that chain ownership decreases the amount of news content in a newspaper:

- Litman and Bridges' study found that as the number of newspapers in a group increased, the number of lines of news content decreased (1986).

The main arguments that chain ownership does not harm a newspaper's watchdog role are:

- Corporate newspapers are more profitable than independently-owned papers and have more resources. They have better marketing and advertising departments and can provide more money to purchase better equipment for reporters and hire additional reporters, which will improve quality (Demers, 1996).
- Editor and managers at corporate newspapers are less concerned about profits because they do not have to worry about meeting the payroll because large companies have large enough budgets to meet it (Companie, 2000).
- Because corporately-owned newspapers have fewer ties to the community, reporters and editors are more likely to act as the public's watchdog and hold professional norms and values to a higher standard (Companie, 2000).
- Corporately-owned newspapers are also at a greater distance from political pressure, and editors know that if they offend local authorities, they will still have a job or can move to another newspaper within the same chain.

In fact, studies suggest that chain ownership does not harm or can even help editorial page coverage because newspapers owned by large chains may have reporters who are more insulated from local political pressure than smaller chains or independent newspapers whose owners may be more politically connected:

- Demers' 1996 review of 17 studies on chain versus independent newspapers

found few differences in editorial page content between chain and non-chain newspapers (Companie & Gomery, 2000).

- Demers' (1999) questionnaire of editors and reporters at 223 newspapers concluded that corporate newspapers publish more staff-generated editorials and letters to the editor that are critical of the status quo and of mainstream groups because they are more insulated from local political pressures. In fact, Demers found that highly corporate newspapers run twice as many editorials critical of mainstream groups than independent newspapers.

In this study, there was no statistically significant relationship between a newspaper's circulation or ownership and its performance of the watchdog role.

The results to the research question support the research that finds that there essentially isn't much difference between the editorial quality or watchdog role of chain newspapers or independently owned newspapers. Newspapers owned by larger chains did not over- or under-perform independently-owned newspapers or those owned by small chains, or vice-versa.

The results of research question six also do not support research that indicates that large chain ownership helps the quality of news coverage. In this study, reporters at corporate newspapers were no more likely to localize the national Sinclair Broadcasting Stolen Honor controversy than reporters at independently owned newspapers.

Since the independent variables ownership and circulation did not explain a statistically significant amount of the variance in the dependent variable watchdog index, this study supports the 1990 American Society of Newspaper Editors ownership survey,

which found that the growth of newspaper chains had little impact on news quality (Coulson 1994).

### Theoretical Implications

One of the theoretical aims of this study was to examine newspapers' watchdog role. According to scholars, media should act as watchdogs not only against the government, but also against other powerful institutions, including other media outlets. The watchdog role of the media include policing institutions of societal power, such as public utilities, medical providers, powerful individuals who don't hold public office (like CEOs) and conglomerates, including media conglomerates (Stone et al., 1997). Previous studies have found that the media do not act as strong watchdogs of other media. Glowaki, Johnson, and Kranenburg (2004) studied adwatches, or stories that analyze whether campaign advertisements are truthful, and found that over the 1988, 1992, 1996, and 2000 presidential election campaigns, *The New York Times*, *Chicago Tribune* and *Los Angeles Times* ran only 87 adwatches, or 30 percent of the total stories about ads. But this study of newspaper coverage of a large television conglomerate's announcement to run a partisan documentary and label it as a news program just 13 days before the election found that newspapers indeed are still capable of performing their watchdog role, especially during an election.

Sinclair Broadcasting's announcement to air the anti-Kerry documentary, and classify it as news programming, was especially egregious because the company had such a wide reach (stations that are viewed on 24 percent of American households), and they planned to run it just 13 days before the 2004 presidential election. The watchdog theory of the

press predicted that the announcement would receive widespread criticism from newspapers in the markets the television stations reach, and indeed it did.

Another theoretical contribution of this study is that newspapers owned by large conglomerates are just as editorially vigorous as independently-owned newspapers and newspapers owned by small chains. The watchdog index did not predict a significant amount of variance in the independent variable Newspaper Ownership. This is good news since there are so few independently owned newspapers in the United States. This study did not support earlier research that suggests that chain ownership harms the quality of newspapers' news coverage.

#### Methodological Implications

This study created some standards for determining what constitutes a watchdog effect, which can be used in future research to measure a newspaper or newspapers' coverage of a specific event, controversy or topic. Specifically, the following standards were used to constitute watchdog coverage for each measure: (a) If 80 percent of the newspapers published stories covering the Sinclair controversy overall, that constituted an overall watchdog effect: (b) if the newspapers published long news items about the controversy as measured by a word count (short news items were defined as 399 words or fewer, medium sized news items were defined as 400 to 699 words, and long news items were defined as 700 words or longer), that indicated a watchdog effect (c) if 70 percent of the newspaper items mentioned the local Sinclair television stations, that also constituted watchdog coverage, (d) if at least 10 percent of the items were either editorials and columns, that indicated a watchdog effect, and (e) if more than 50 percent

of the stories, columns, and editorials were critical of Sinclair Broadcasting in the context of the controversy, that indicated a watchdog effect. These standards, percentages, and word counts could be applied to a future study.

### Implications for Practice and Future Research

This is a study of newspaper coverage of the Sinclair Broadcasting controversy by newspapers in the same towns as Sinclair Broadcasting television stations. That is a strength of the study as far as determining if the newspapers did a good job covering the controversy on a local level. However, a lot of the initial attention to Sinclair's announcement to air the anti-Kerry documentary came from Web sites and bloggers. A future study could examine Web sites' watchdog role in covering the controversy.

Research on the watchdog role of newspapers is an area open to many possibilities. More research on the watchdog role of newspapers is called for, especially in a time when newspapers are threatened by decreasing circulations, less advertising revenue and more competition from Web sites and other media. Since several newspapers have ceased publishing a print edition in the past two years, such as the Rocky Mountain News, The Cincinnati Post and The Albuquerque Tribune, (Newspaper Death Watch Blog), one future study could examine watchdog coverage at newspapers that are now online only to see if they performed a better watchdog role when they were publishing a print product or now that they are online only. Another idea would be to study the watchdog role of blogs and see if they generate their own original reporting or are merely commenting on stories that are generated by more mainstream media sources, like newspapers and television stations. Another study could also examine blogs that generate their own original

reporting to see if they are performing their watchdog roles on certain issues.

Finally, a study on the 2008 election could examine newspaper coverage of President Barack Obama's 30-minute advertisement that ran on more than six broadcast and cable networks in late October 2008 to see if newspapers covered it or criticized it.

### Limitations

One limitation was the coding of the Tone variable. The two coders read every paragraph and coded it as negative, neutral, or positive and then added them up, counting an article as negative if it had more negative than positive paragraphs, and vice-versa. Perhaps the variable would have been better measured at the sentence level to get a more accurate sense of tone.

The population only included 175 articles. However, the whole population of the largest daily newspapers in each city with a Sinclair Broadcasting television station in fall 2004 was examined, so there was no way to increase this population. The study could have included national newspapers, but it was important to see how the local newspapers covered the controversy on a local level. Also, letters to the editor could have been included in the study, but those are produced by readers and not by the newspaper staff. Examining the letters to the editor might be a nice way to expand this study or would make a good topic for a future study. Also, to expand the study, all of the newspapers in the United States, not just those in cities where a Sinclair Broadcasting television station was located, could be examined.

## Conclusion

This study has shown that newspapers are still fulfilling a watchdog role. In fact, 92.7 percent of them ran news items covering the controversy, and only three newspaper in the entire population (or 7.3 percent) ignored the controversy completely. Newspapers published medium length editorials and news stories and long columns covering the controversy. More than 70 percent of the news items mentioned the local Sinclair station. In fact, 72.6 of the news items mentioned the local station, putting the controversy in context for local readers. Of the 175 news items in the population, 43 of them (24.6 percent) were columns and 25 (14.3 percent) were editorials, so the newspapers vigorously covered the controversy on its editorial pages as well. A strong majority of the overall news items had a tone critical of Sinclair Broadcasting in the context of the controversy. Of the 175 news items overall, 137 of them (or 78.9 percent) had a critical tone, indicating a watchdog effect. The placement of the news items, with 47 percent of them running either on the front page or a section front, also suggested a watchdog effect.

Larger newspapers, which naturally have larger staffs than small newspapers, ran longer stories and more stories that mentioned the local Sinclair Station. But small newspapers still covered the controversy. This suggests that larger papers with more resources can often cover the news on a more in-depth level.

Previous research on newspaper ownership has been split on whether large chain newspapers are more editorially vigorous than independently owned papers. But in this study, the watchdog index did not predict a statistically significant change in the ownership. This suggests that large chain newspapers can still act as watchdogs on other media, as can small chain newspapers and independently-owned newspapers.

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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A

The following chart lists all of the television stations that Sinclair Broadcasting, Inc. owned at the time that it announced that its stations would run the “Stolen Honor: Wounds that Never Heal” documentary. The list of stations is from *Columbia Journalism Review’s* October 10, 2004 Who Owns What Web site, under Sinclair Broadcasting.

<b>State</b>	<b>City Station is Located in</b>	<b>Call Sign and Network</b>	<b>Newspaper</b>	<b>Daily M-Sat. Circulation**/ Owner/ # papers in chain</b>
Alabama	Huntsville	WTTO/WB	The Huntsville Times	55,000/Advance Publications, Inc./ 19
	Birmingham	WABM/UPN	The Birmingham News	146,000/ Advance Publications, Inc./ 19
		WDBB/WB		
California	West Sacramento	KOVR/CBS	The Sacramento Bee	291,000/ The McClatchy Co./ 12
Florida	Pensacola	WEAR	Pensacola News Journal	62,000/Gannett Co., Inc./ 95
	Fort Walton Beach	WFGX	Northwest Florida Daily News	40,000/Freedom Communications, Inc./ 26
	Tallahassee	WTWC/NBC	Tallahassee Democrat	50,000/Gannett Co., Inc./ 95
	Tampa	WTTA/WB	The Tampa Tribune	226,000/ Media General, Inc./ 28

Illinois	Bloomington	WYZZ/Fox	The Pantagraph	46,000/Lee Enterprises, Inc./ 38
	Springfield	WICS/NBC	The State Journal-Register	54,000/The Copley Press, Inc./ 9
	Champaign	WICD/NBC	The News-Gazette	40,000/Independently owned/ 1
Indiana	Indianapolis	WTTV	The Indianapolis Star	253,000/ Gannett Co., Inc./ 95
		WTTK		
Iowa	Cedar Rapids	KGAN/CBS	The Gazette	70,000/Gazette Communications, Inc./ 1
	Des Moines	KDSM/Fox	The Des Moines Register	147,000/Independently owned/ 1
Kentucky	Lexington	WDKY/Fox	Lexington Herald-Leader	118,000/Knight Ridder/ 33
Maryland	Baltimore	WBFF/Fox	The Sun	257,000/Tribune Co./ 13
		WNUV/WB		
Massachusetts	Springfield	WGGB/ABC	The Republican	84,000/ Advance Publications, Inc./19
Maine	Conroe (near Portland)	WGME/CBS	Portland Press Herald	75,000/ Blethen Maine Newspapers/ 6
Michigan	Flint	WSMH/Fox	The Flint Journal	83,000/ Advance Publications, Inc./19
Minnesota	Minneapolis	KMWB/WB	Star Tribune	399,000/The McClatchy Co./ 12
Missouri	Cape Girardeau	KBSI/Fox	Southeast Missourian	15,000/Rust Communications/ 16
		WDKA/WB		

Nevada	Las Vegas	KVWB/WB	Las Vegas Review Journal*	178,000/Stephens Media Group/ 12
	Las Vegas	KFBT/Independent	Las Vegas Review Journal*	178,000/ Stephens Media Group/ 12
New York	Grand Island (near Buffalo)	WUTV/Fox	The Buffalo News	189,000/ Berkshire Hathaway/ 1.5
	Buffalo	WNYO/WB		
	Rochester	WUHF/Fox	Rochester Democrat and Chronicle	180,000/Gannett Co., Inc./ 95
	Syracuse	WSYT/Fox	The Post Standard	119,000/ Advance Publications, Inc./ 19
WNYS/WB				
North Carolina	Asheville	WLOS	The Asheville Citizen Times	55,000/ Gannett Co., Inc./ 95
	Winston-Salem	WXLV/ABC	Winston-Salem Journal	84,000/ Media General, Inc./ 28
		WUPN/UPN		
	Raleigh	WLFL/WB	The News & Observer	173,000/ The McClatchy Co./ 12
WRDC/UPN				
Ohio	Cincinnati	WSTR/WB	The Cincinnati Enquirer	185,000/Gannett Co., Inc./ 95
	Columbus	WTTE/Fox	The Columbus Dispatch	272,000/independently Owned/ 1
		WSYX/ABC		
	Dayton	WKEF/ABC	Dayton Daily News	121,000/ Cox Newspapers, Inc./ 17
WRGT/Fox				
		KOCB/WB		

Oklahoma	Oklahoma City	KOCB/WB	The Oklahoman	191,000/ independently owned/ 1
		KOKH/Fox		
Pennsylvania	Pittsburgh	WPGH/Fox	Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	216,000/ Block Communications Inc.*/ 2
		WCWB/WB		
South Carolina	Charleston	WMMP/UPN	The Post and Courier	94,000/ Evening Post Community Publications Group, Inc./ 3
	North Charleston	WTAT/Fox		
Tennessee	Nashville	WZTV/Fox	The Tennessean	170,000/ Gannet Co. Inc./ 95
		WUXP/UPN		
	Johnson City	WEMT/Fox	Johnson City Press	29,000/Sandusky Newspapers/ 7
Texas	San Antonio	KABB/Fox	San Antonia Express News	250,000/Hearst Newspapers/ 13
		KRRT/WB		
Virginia	Norfolk	WTVZ/WB	The Virginian- Pilot	197,000/Land Mark Metro West Newspapers/ 5
	Richmond	WRLH/Fox	Richmond Times- Dispatch	188,000/Media General, Inc./ 28
West Virginia	Charleston	WCHS/ABC	Charleston Daily Mail*	67,000/Media News Group, Inc./ 54
	Hurricane (near Charleston)	WVAH/Fox	Charleston Daily Mail*	67,000/ Media News Group, Inc./ 54
Wisconsin	Madison	WMSN/Fox	Wisconsin State Journal	96,000/Capital Newspapers/ 8
	Milwaukee	WCGV/UPN	Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	243,000/ Independently Owned/ 1
WVTV/WB				

\*In the cases of newspapers that operate as part of a joint operating agreement, one of the two newspapers was randomly chosen.

\*\* Circulation was rounded to the nearest 1,000.

## Appendix B

This chart lists each newspaper and the number of news stories, columns, and editorials it ran about the Stolen Honor documentary and the mean number of words for the news items it published.

	Stories	Columns	Editorials	Total items	Mean Words
The Huntsville Times	0	0	0	0	0
The Birmingham News	0	0	0	0	0
The Sacramento Bee	3	1	0	4	929.3
Pensacola News Journal	1	0	1	2	280.5
Northwest Florida Daily News	1	0	0	1	705
Tallahassee Democrat	3	1	3	7	562.6
The Tampa Tribune	3	0	2	5	726.6
The Pantagraph	1	0	0	1	777
The State Journal-Register	2	2	0	4	863
The News-Gazette	5	1	2	8	516.1
The Indianapolis Star	0	0	0	0	0
The Gazette	4	0	1	5	373.2
The Des Moines Register	1	1	1	3	466.3
Lexington Herald-Leader	2	0	0	2	321
The Sun	15	2	8	25	790.5
The Republican	0	1	0	1	399
Portland Press Herald	11	1	1	13	688.4
The Flint Journal	2	1	0	3	395.7
Star Tribune	3	2	0	5	684.4
Southeast Missourian	1	0	0	1	645
Las Vegas Review Journal	0	0	1	1	615
The Buffalo News	1	1	2	4	748.75
Rochester Democrat and Chronicle	1	1	0	2	424
The Post Standard	3	0	0	3	524.3
The Asheville Citizen Times	4	2	1	7	740
Winston-Salem Journal	1	0	1	2	754
The News & Observer	2	0	2	4	655.3
The Cincinnati Enquirer	1	0	1	2	473
The Columbus Dispatch	4	0	0	4	417.8
Dayton Daily News	2	0	1	3	340.3
The Oklahoman	2	0	1	3	507.3
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	6	2	2	10	678.1

The Post and Courier	1	0	0	1	1082
The Tennessean	1	0	0	1	983
Johnson City Press	1	0	0	1	384
San Antonio Express News	1	1	0	2	446.5
The Virginian-Pilot	1	1	0	2	491
Richmond Times-Dispatch	4	1	4	9	582.3
Charleston Daily Mail	9	1	1	11	550.4
Wisconsin State Journal	2	2	0	4	458.3
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	2	0	7	9	631.4
Overall totals	107	25	43	175	626.3

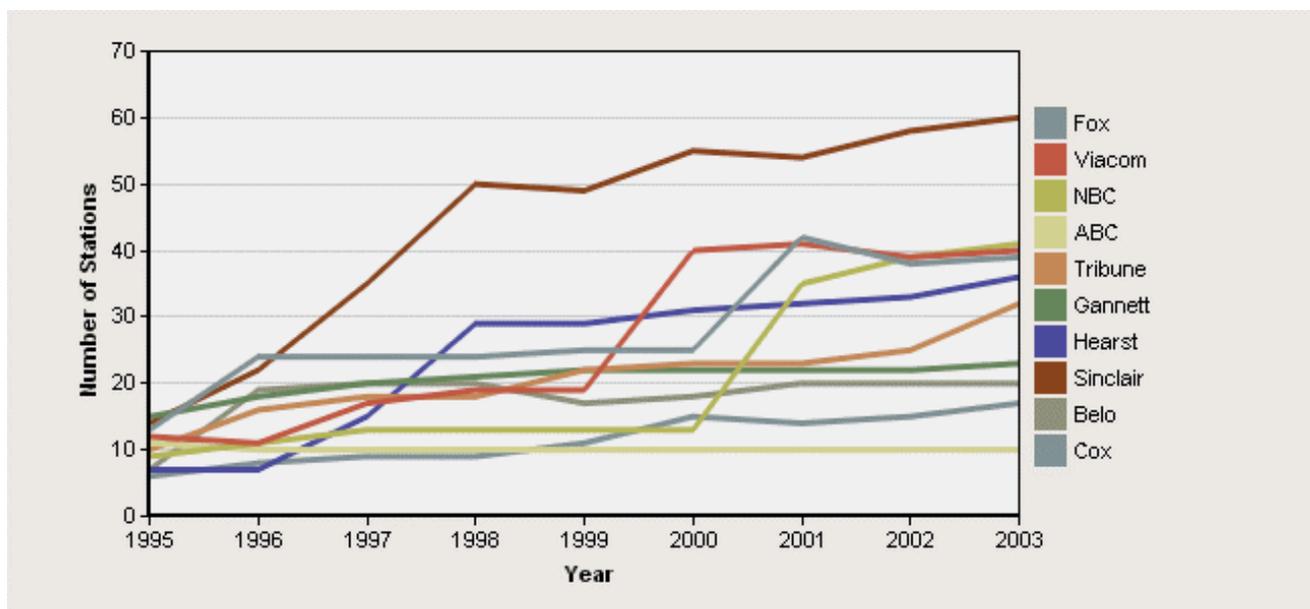
## Appendix C

This map shows markets in which Sinclair Broadcasting Inc. owned a station in fall 2004.



*Source: Sinclair Broadcast Group, Inc. Web Site*

This chart, from the State of the Media 2005 Web Site, shows the increase in stations owned by large media companies, specifically Sinclair Broadcasting.



## Appendix D

### Coding Definitions and Instructions

Each item was coded with an item number to ensure that no items were coded twice. The numbers range from 1 to 175, so the 41 newspapers in the population ran a total of 175 articles, while three newspapers in the sample didn't run any news stories, columns, or editorials at all on the controversy. Each item was coded with a number that corresponded to the paper that the item was published in, ranging from 1 to 41. The circulation size of each paper was recorded ahead of time and rounded to the nearest 1,000 using figures taken from the *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 2006*. Each coder reported the circulation. The ownership was also recorded ahead of time for each newspaper in terms of the number of daily newspapers that the chain that owned each newspaper owned. This information was also gained from *Editor and Publisher International Yearbook 2006*.

Each article was coded as a news story, editorial, or column. Columns were defined as opinion pieces that contained a byline, while editorials were defined as opinion pieces that were unsigned. This was a rank variable, and editorials were coded as 3, columns were coded as 2, and news stories were coded as 1. Thus, if a newspaper ran an editorial criticizing Sinclair about the controversy, that was considered the highest level of watchdog coverage. If it ran a column criticizing Sinclair about the controversy, that was considered the second highest level of watchdog coverage for the Item Type variable, while news stories were given the lowest level of watchdog coverage.

Placement was also a rank variable, and items were coded 3 for stories that ran on the front page, 2 for stories that ran on a section front, and 1 for stories that ran anywhere

else in the newspaper. Front page stories get more attention than stories that run on section front or inside the newspaper.

Publication date was recorded as a number 1 through 46 representing all of the possible dates for the sample. The data was not used in the analysis as it would have been too subjective to determine which dates indicated that the newspapers were fulfilling their watchdog roles more than other dates.

Length was measured as the number of words in the entire article. This variable was later used to help determine watchdog role. The more words a newspaper ran about the controversy, the more it was considered to be fulfilling its watchdog role.

Another important variable was whether or not the newspaper item mentioned the local television station or not. This was a nominal variable, so articles that mentioned the local station, either by the station's call number or by the network, were coded as 1, and those that didn't mention it were coded as 0. Newspapers were considered to be fulfilling their watchdog roles more if they mentioned the local station, thus telling the readers how the national controversy impacted them on a local level.

The Tone variable was coded in the following manner. The coders read each paragraph and determined if it was positive, negative, or neutral. Then all of the paragraphs were added up, and if there were more negative than positive statements, it was coded as negative. If there were more positive than negative statements, it was considered positive. If there were equal numbers of positive and negative statements, it was considered neutral.

Finally, the Bylines variable was coded as a nominal variable. Items were coded as 0 if they were written by a wire service. If they were written by a local writer, a local writer

and a wire service, had a byline that indicated they were written by staff writer, or if they had no byline, as in the case with locally-written editorials, they were coded as 1. Thus, newspapers were considered to be doing their watchdog role more if they devoted local resources to the items and had a local reporter do some reporting on the controversy.

## Appendix E

## Sample coding sheet

Item Number \_ \_ \_ \_  
Paper \_ \_  
Circulation size \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_  
Ownership \_ \_  
Item type \_  
Placement \_  
Publication Date \_ \_  
Length – \_ \_ \_ \_ \_  
Local TV Station \_  
Tone \_  
Byline \_

## Appendix F

## Coding Sheet Key

Item Number – from 001 to 175

Paper – from 01 to 41 - see chart (provided in Appendix A)

Circulation size - see chart (provided in Appendix A)

Ownership – the number of daily newspapers that the newspaper's parent company owns  
- see chart (provided in Appendix A)

Item type –news story = 1; column =2; editorial = 3

Placement – front page = 3; other section front = 2; inside = 1

Publication Date – date article was published, 1 through 46

Length – measured in number of words in entire article

Local Sinclair TV Station mention- whether or not item lists local television station – yes  
= 1; no = 0

Tone - negative = 3 ; neutral = 2; positive = 1

Byline – wire service = 0: local writer, local writer and wire report, staff writer or none =  
1

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