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Media concentration of ownership and its effects on editorial page vigor of West Virginia daily newspapers

Rita F. Counts Colistra
West Virginia University

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**Media Concentration of Ownership and its Effects on
Editorial Page Vigor of West Virginia Daily Newspapers**

Rita F. Counts Colistra

Thesis submitted to the Perley Isaac Reed School of Journalism
at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science in Journalism

Terry Wimmer, Ph.D., Chair
Ivan Pinnell, Ph.D.
George Esper, Ph.D.
Carol Zwickel, Ph.D.

Department of Journalism

Morgantown, W.Va.
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ABSTRACT

Media Concentration of Ownership and its Effects on Editorial Page Vigor of West Virginia Daily Newspapers

Rita F. Counts Colistra

This study examines the effects of media concentration of ownership on editorial page vigor of West Virginia daily newspapers that changed from independent to non-independent ownership from 1965 to present. A content analysis over two-time periods, a one-week constructed sample while under independent ownership and a one-week constructed sample after the newspaper changed to non-independent ownership, suggests that overall editorial page vigor does not change. However, data concerning editorial geographic focus and number of letters to the editor suggest an increase in vigor after moving to non-independent ownership. That is, the newspapers published more locally focused editorials and more letters to the editor while under non-independent ownership rather than while under independent ownership as predicted in the hypotheses. This is the first known study to include columns, as well as editorials and letters to the editor, in an editorial page vigor analysis. An expanded study to include newspapers in similar regions and a larger constructed week sample is suggested. An examination of editorial cartoons, in addition to editorials, columns and letters to the editor, is also suggested for future editorial page vigor research.

DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to my brilliant and supportive husband, Kevin, and my faithful four-legged companion Coreopsis Moonbeam.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Media concentration of ownership and its effects on journalistic quality have been highly debated issues ever since chain newspapers began to flourish in the United States. Since chain ownership of newspapers began in the 1800s many people, communications scholars and journalists alike, have contemplated its effects on the media industry. In his early study of the growth of U.S. newspaper chains, Weinfeld found that the first significant growth of chain newspapers, in numbers and circulation, was in the four years following World War I.¹ By 1923, newspaper chains had already established themselves throughout America with thirty- four different chains.² This rapid growth of chain newspapers continued to spread. In fact, total circulation of chain newspapers had increased by almost 76% by 1930, while non-chain owned circulation saw a markedly smaller rise of only 3.4%.³ Circulation in the chain newspapers was not the only thing on the rise. After the rough Depression years on both chain and non-chain newspapers, the number of newspaper chains increased rapidly to sixty-three in 1935; non-chains, however, declined.⁴

Busterna continued the study of trends in newspaper ownership in his updated 1986 research.⁵ He found that 68% of all daily newspapers were independently owned in

¹ William Weinfeld, "The Growth of Daily Newspaper Chains in the United States: 1923, 1926-1935," *Journalism Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (1936): 362.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 365.

⁴ Ibid., 369.

⁵ John C. Busterna, "Trends in Daily Newspaper Ownership," *Journalism Quarterly* 65 (winter 1988): 831-38.

1960, but by 1986 that number had decreased to only 30%.⁶ Additionally, Busterna suggested that this increase of chain ownership and chain size resulted in a further decline in the competition of daily newspapers and an increase in absentee ownership.⁷

The question now is how does this change of ownership affect the product the reader receives? More importantly does this trend of ownership change affect the editorial page, which is considered the voice of any newspaper? Has the editorial page become more or less vigorous as a result?

The importance of the editorial page is obvious. As the late reporter and columnist Raymond Clapper put it:

Discussion is the breath of a democracy's life. The constant challenge of one opinion against another is essential. Without it democracy becomes a fragile hothouse growth liable to snap under the first gust of opposition wind. The editorial page is—or should be—America's town hall. The type of debate and the type of newspaper writing that must make a thing either black or white, that must distort it out of all proportion, that take a set of facts or circumstances and are impelled to throw in a dash of sensational overstatement, are an imposition on the public... It is just as inexcusable for a man to throw a verbal stink bomb into a crowd as it would be to sabotage machinery in a defense plant. There is sabotage to public opinion just as there is sabotage to machinery.⁸

With Clapper's statement in mind, the author hopes to provide better insight in understanding the effects of media concentration of ownership on news product, namely editorial page vigor, in an extensive literature assessment. Areas such as financial goals and profits, standardization of content, content quality, and, most importantly, editorial

⁶ Ibid., 835.

⁷ Ibid., 838.

⁸ Raymond Clapper, *Watching the World*, with an introduction by Ernie Pyle, ed. Olive Ewing Clapper (New York: Whittlesey House, 1944), 35-36.

quality and aggressiveness will be examined in an attempt to illuminate possible advantages and disadvantages associated with different ownership situations. Additionally, federal policies and regulations aimed at preserving newspapers and offering options for financial relief will be discussed.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Does media concentration of ownership have a positive, a negative, or no impact on the product the media audience receives?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This review of literature seeks to answer the aforementioned research question while examining and interpreting differences in research styles, which often lead to contrasting findings. The author will provide the theoretical framework behind the premise of media concentration of ownership's effects on news and editorial page decisions. Additionally, the author will review federal acts and agreements put in place to aid troubled newspapers while preserving editorial individuality. Moreover, this review will examine the different areas mentioned earlier believed to be affected by media concentration of ownership.

Theoretical Framework

As most newspaper ownership situations are unique, so are the practices in which their owners or managers control them. Since its inception to the field of mass communication, gatekeeping research has offered people a better understanding in the way the media function. Not only can editors and reporters act as keeper of the gate, but now with various ownership situations, stockholders and chain owners may also serve as gatekeepers. However, as one study points out, these gatekeeping practices are not always obvious and are sometimes a result of "subtle" pressures felt by editors by their chain owners.⁹

Gatekeeping theory has been around for more than half a century and is one of the

⁹ Theodore L. Glasser, David S. Allen, and S. Elizabeth Blanks, "The Influence of Chain Ownership On News Play: A Case Study," *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (autumn 1989): 613.

most researched fields of communications. German psychologist and expatriate Kurt Lewin first coined the term during his research on social change in times of food shortages following World War II.¹⁰ Lewin found that food passes through gates using different channels with gatekeepers selecting or rejecting the items that are then delivered to a family's table.¹¹ Although the theory has a psychological background, Lewin implied that this theory of gates and channels could be applied to items of news traveling through different forms of communication paths.¹²

Communications scholar David Manning White was the first to apply Lewin's theory to media and communications.¹³ His case study focused on one Midwestern newspaper wire editor's story selection process and the forces that affected decision-making.¹⁴ He found that the editor applied both 'individual' and 'organizational' routines that affected which stories would be selected or rejected.¹⁵ These routine concepts were not named as such until much later.¹⁶ While his study was limited because it only focused

¹⁰ Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Concept, Method and Reality in Science; Social Equilibria and Social Change," *Human Relations* 1 (June 1947): 5-40; Kurt Lewin, "Frontiers in Group Dynamics: Channels of Group Life; Social Planning and Action Research," *Human Relations* 1 (November 1947): 143-53.

¹¹ Kurt Lewin, *Field Theory in Social Science: Selected Theoretical Papers*, ed. Dorwin Cartwright, (NY: Harper & Brothers, 1951), 176.

¹² *Ibid.*, 187.

¹³ David Manning White, "The 'Gate Keeper': A Case Study in the Selection of News," *Journalism Quarterly* 27 (fall 1950): 383-90.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 386-87.

¹⁶ Pamela J. Shoemaker and Stephen D. Reese, *Mediating the Message: Theories of Influences on Mass Media Content*, (NY: Longman, 1996), 106.

on one editor's rejection of news items, it spurred a great deal of interest in the theory and began a long line of research that continues to be investigated today.

When discussing gatekeeping, it is essential to note its connection with at least one other study of communications: agenda-setting. The reason is that gatekeepers control the flow of news information through the different mediums and, therefore, set the agenda for the types of news that is printed or aired. McCombs and Shaw's agenda-setting research on the 1968 presidential election focused on what voters perceived as key issues versus the issues presented by the media.¹⁷ They compared the data and found a surprisingly high relationship.¹⁸ This relationship supports Cohen's claim that the press "may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about."¹⁹ McCombs and Shaw's research, therefore, emphasized agenda-setting as a form of gatekeeping in the news. This theory is helpful in understanding media concentration of ownership situations because owners of these different types of newspapers have various agendas they want their medium to portray. Sometimes the mere perception of an agenda influences the gatekeeper's choice in the editorial chain.

Shoemaker and Reese developed a hierarchical model that applies both to modern studies and earlier gatekeeping research. The model proposes that several levels affect

¹⁷ Maxwell E. McCombs and Donald L. Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972): 176-87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 182-87.

¹⁹ Bernard Cohen, *The Press and Foreign Policy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963): 120, quoted in McCombs and Shaw, "The Agenda-Setting Function of the Mass Media," 177.

the gatekeeping process and include: individual, media routine, organizational, extramedia, and ideological.²⁰

The individual level involves personal preferences by the reporter, editor, or director. However, different mediums follow different gatekeeping practices. Abbott and Brassfield's study showed that newspapers have several gatekeepers, whereas the initial television gatekeeper tends to make the final decision.²¹ Other gatekeeping studies have found that the decision-making process in television news is based on a group rather than on an individual level.²² One Berkowitz study implied that even though television news decisions are made in groups, they are not necessarily balanced groups; the group's opinion is often swayed by the person in charge.²³

Studies on media routine levels in gatekeeping involve factors such as newsworthiness and timeliness.²⁴ Shoemaker, Eichholz, Kim, and Wrigley found that routines of the media have more control over news content than individual forces.²⁵

Organizational routines including available resources, editorial demands, time, and restraints focus on technical levels of gatekeeping. Bantz, McCorkle, and Baade's

²⁰ Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating the Message*, 106.

²¹ Eric A. Abbott and Lynn T. Brassfield, "Comparing Decisions on Releases by TV and Newspaper Gatekeepers," *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (winter 1989): 855.

²² Dan Berkowitz, "Refining the Gatekeeping Metaphor for Local Television News," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 34, no. 1 (1990): 55-69; Edward Jay Epstein, *News from Nowhere: Television and the News*, Vintage Books ed. (NY: Random House, 1974).

²³ Berkowitz, "Refining the Gatekeeping Metaphor for Local Television News," 69.

²⁴ Pamela J. Shoemaker et al., "Individual and Routine Forces in Gatekeeping," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 78 (summer 2001): 233-242; Gaye Tuchman, *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*, (NY: Free Press, 1978).

²⁵ Shoemaker et al., "Individual and Routine Forces in Gatekeeping," 240.

study went so far as to compare these routines to a factory.²⁶ However, they noted that although news work is accomplished through steps producing uniform product within a given timeframe, it is clearly not an assembly line.²⁷

Extra-media levels of gatekeeping refer to sources, advertisers, government, and interest groups among others. Some studies have relied on this level of analysis for research in attempting to get to the first step of the gatekeeping process.²⁸ Berkowitz pointed out that in the agenda-building process, the relationship between journalists and news sources should be examined in addition to the newsgathering process.²⁹ This relationship should be studied to ensure that the journalist and the news source are not simply affiliated to build one another's agenda. That is, in exchange for the source providing information, the journalist agrees to report on issues the source deems important. To put it in the words of a cliché, the examination is to ensure that a "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours" association is not in place.

Ideological levels of gatekeeping include local and national values in addition to cultural influences.³⁰ Soloski's research found that these factors were included in editor decisions to omit potentially offensive material.³¹ However, the journalists in the study believed it did not affect the ability to inform their readers.³²

²⁶ Charles R. Bantz, Suzanne McCorkle, and Roberta C. Baade, "The News Factory," *Communication Research* 7 (January 1980): 45-68.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁸ Dan Berkowitz, "Television News Sources and News Channels: A Study in Agenda-Building," *Journalism Quarterly* 64 (autumn 1987): 508-513; Judy VanSlyke Turk, "Information Subsidies and Influence," *Public Relations Review* 11, no. 3 (1985): 10-25.

²⁹ Berkowitz, "Television News Sources and News Channels," 513.

³⁰ Denis McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory*, Third ed., (London: Sage, 1994): 213.

Gatekeeping research proves to be helpful in the issue of media concentration. Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchical model of the different levels of gatekeeping routines help explain some of the practices used by newspapers under different ownership situations.

Joint Operating Agreement and the Newspaper Preservation Act

In 1970, the Newspaper Preservation Act (NPA) was enacted by the Congress. Formerly known as the Failing Newspaper Act in 1967, the NPA was an attempt to save failing newspapers that were having a difficult time competing in a two newspaper market.³³ As stated in declaration of NPA in Section 2, the policy was “in the public interest of maintaining the historic independence” of U.S. newspapers and the policy permitted joint operating agreements (JOAs) to alleviate “economic distress.”³⁴

Under the NPA, a JOA is defined as:

any contract, agreement, joint venture (whether or not incorporated), or other arrangement entered into by two or more newspaper owners for the publication of two or more newspaper publications, pursuant to which joint or common production facilities are established or operated and joint or unified action is taken or agreed to be taken with respect to any one or more of the following: printing, time, method, and field of application; allocation of production facilities; distribution; advertising solicitation; circulation solicitation; business department; establishment of advertising rates; establishment of circulation rates and revenue distribution:

³¹ John Soloski, “News reporting and professionalism: Some constraints on the reporting of the news,” *Media, Culture, and Society* 11 (April 1989): 224-25.

³² *Ibid.*, 225.

³³ John C. Busterna and Robert G. Picard, *Joint Operating Agreements: The Newspaper Preservation Act and its Application*, (Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1993): 37, ix.

³⁴ Congress, Senate, Newspaper Preservation Act of 1970, 91st Cong., 2nd sess., S.R., 1520 Congressional Record, 116, no. 2, daily ed. (30 January 1970): 2018. The terms Joint Operating Agreement, Joint Operating Arrangement, and Joint Ownership Agreement apply to JOA. The term JOA is referred to those agreements enacted under the NPA of 1970.

Provided, that there is no merger, combination, or amalgamation of editorial or reportorial staffs, and that editorial policies be independently determined.³⁵

That is, in communities that could no longer support two competitive newspapers, the newspapers were permitted to share the same operational costs such as printing facilities and advertising and business departments as long as they maintained separate editorial and news operations. Maintaining these separate departments was to ensure that the public had a diverse editorial voice.

In order to be given a JOA, the NPA stated that written consent had to be granted by the Attorney General.³⁶ A JOA was permitted only if the Attorney General determined that not more than one of the newspapers was failing.³⁷ According to the NPA, a “failing newspaper” is a publication that is in danger of failure or appears to turn into or remain a financial failure.³⁸

The first identified joint operation among competing newspapers was in 1933 between the Albuquerque Journal and The Albuquerque Tribune in New Mexico, almost 40 years before the NPA created the term.³⁹ Both newspapers at the time had faced decreased revenues over a two-year period. Scripps-Howard, the oldest identifiable

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Busterna and Picard, *Joint Operating Agreements*, 2.

newspaper chain,⁴⁰ merged the two facilities and formed the Albuquerque Publishing Company.⁴¹ The controversial issue of the agreement, however, was the fact that the two newspapers formed a monopoly.⁴² Both newspapers were non-competitive, under the same circulation and advertising rates, and equally divided all profits.⁴³ The monopoly issue would arise in federal court more than 30 years later involving two Arizona newspapers.

The Citizen Publishing Case was born in 1965 when the U.S. Justice Department filed an antitrust suit against two Tucson newspapers running under a JOA.⁴⁴ The newspapers, The Arizona Evening Star and The Tucson Daily Citizen, were charged with violating sections of both the Sherman and Clayton acts regarding monopolizing the daily newspaper market and a merger violation.⁴⁵ The main issue was that when joint operations were agreed upon for the two newspapers, the owners put in writing that if one should decide to sell, the other owner would have first right of refusal.⁴⁶ According to Busterna and Picard, the Justice Department probably would not have interfered with the

⁴⁰ Weinfeld, "Growth of Daily Newspaper Chains," 380.

⁴¹ www.sfbg.com/News/joa/timeline.html, Accessed on November 7, 2002.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Busterna and Picard, *Joint Operating Agreements*, 29.

⁴⁵ Ibid. The Sherman Act violation included Section 1, which deals with a contract in restraint of trade, and Section 2, which deals with monopolizing a daily newspaper market. The Clayton Act charge included Section 7, which deals with the direct purchase of one newspaper by the stockholders of another newspaper in the same market, was a merger violation.

⁴⁶ *United States v. Citizen Publishing*, 280 F. Supp. 983 (D. Ariz. 1968).

newspapers had they not attempted to merge into one.⁴⁷ The U.S. District Court found that the operating agreement was a per se antitrust violation because of the price fixing, market control and profit pooling the newspapers practiced.⁴⁸ The Court deemed that the two newspapers eliminate these practices in addition to maintaining separate advertising and circulation operations in order to restore competition.⁴⁹ Citizen Publishing Company appealed to no avail and in 1969, the Supreme Court upheld the decision with a majority decision written by Justice Douglas.⁵⁰

As noted in the NPA, the newspapers under a JOA are to maintain independent editorial and news departments. Preserving the separate editorial opinions is essential in preserving a diverse “marketplace of ideas.”⁵¹ However, studies on diversified opinion under different ownership situations have yielded contrasting results.

Ardoin’s comparative analysis of newspapers under joint printing contracts found that the newspapers do not represent independent voices.⁵² That is, joint operating newspapers tend to homogenize their news output and take similar editorial stances. In contrast, Hick’s and Featherston’s content analysis of uniformity of content in Louisiana

⁴⁷ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁸ Busterna and Picard, *Joint Operating Agreements*, 33; United States v. Citizen Publishing Co., 280 F. Supp. 992-93 (D. Ariz. 1968).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Citizen Publishing Co. v. United States, 394 U.S. 131 (1969); Busterna and Picard, *Joint Operating Agreements*, 30.

⁵¹ John Milton, *Areopagitica*, with a commentary by Sir Richard C. Jebb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918; reprint, New York: AMS PRESS, 1971), 58 (page citation is to the reprint edition); Abrams v. United States, 250 U.S. 616, 629, 40 S. Ct. 17,22 (1919).

⁵² Birthney Ardoin, “A Comparison of Newspapers Under Joint Printing Contracts,” *Journalism Quarterly* 50 (summer 1973): 347.

newspapers under various forms of ownership implicated the contrary.⁵³ The study suggested that opinion content was not duplicated in any of the analyzed newspapers, including the pair under JOA in Shreveport.⁵⁴ Even though no editorial uniformity was found, the study did, however, find similarities in general news content throughout all newspapers.⁵⁵

Differences in findings of the two studies are perhaps due to the variations of samples and sample size. The latter study focused only on newspapers in one state under three different ownership circumstances, only one situation of which was operating under JOA.⁵⁶ Yet, Ardoin's earlier study compared newspapers under JOAs throughout the United States.⁵⁷ Moreover, the data were collected during two critical periods in newspaper history: before the Justice Departments antitrust lawsuit against the two Tucson newspapers and after the Court's decision against the agreement.⁵⁸ Hicks and Featherston's research was more focused on content and appearance differences between morning and evening editions of a sample of the state's newspapers.⁵⁹

In sum, the JOA and NPA were designed to preserve financially troubled newspapers in market by sharing printing and business operating costs while maintaining

⁵³ Ronald G. Hicks and James S. Featherston, "Duplication of Newspaper Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations," *Journalism Quarterly* 55 (autumn 1978): 549-53.

⁵⁴ Hicks and Featherston, "Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations," 551.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 553.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 550.

⁵⁷ Ardoin, "Newspapers Under Joint Printing Contracts," 341.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Hicks and Featherston, "Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations," 549-53.

independent editorial voices. The NPA, however, continues to have opponents and remains a target of criticism. For example, in the 1980s, JOA newspapers were accused of competing unlawfully with non-JOA newspapers by abusing their antitrust exemptions.⁶⁰ Furthermore, in the early nineties, JOA opponents went so far as attempting to have the NPA abolished.⁶¹ According to one critic, the Newspaper Preservation Act is failing to preserve many troubled newspapers.⁶²

Newspaper Ownership Situations and their Effects

Financial Issues and Profit Maximization

Media and communications scholars have had a field day researching the possible effects of ownership on several newspaper issues. One issue, financial goals, has been a part of numerous studies involving media concentration.⁶³ Chain newspapers are characteristically perceived as forcing mainly profit-driven material. At least one study supports the notion that they are only interested in “all the news that makes a profit.”⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Busterna and Picard, *Joint Operating Agreements*, 3.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² Busterna, “Trends in Daily Newspaper Ownership,” 834.

⁶³ John C. Busterna, “How Managerial Ownership Affects Profit Maximization in Newspaper Firms,” *Journalism Quarterly* 66 (summer 1989): 302-07, 358; William B. Blankenberg and Gary W. Ozanich, “The Effects of Public Ownership on the Financial Performance of Newspaper Corporations,” *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (spring 1993): 68-75; Stephen Lacy, Mary Alice Shaver, and Charles St. Cyr, “The Effects of Public Ownership and Newspaper Competition on the Financial Performance of Newspaper Corporations: A Replication and Extension,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73 (summer 1996): 332-41; Martha N. Matthews, “How Public Ownership Affects Publisher Autonomy,” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73 (summer 1996): 342-53; Clarice N. Olien, Phillip J. Tichenor, and George A. Donohue, “Relation Between Corporate Ownership And Editor Attitudes About Business,” *Journalism Quarterly* 65 (summer 1988): 259-66; Gilbert Cranberg, Randall Bezanson, and John Soloski, *Taking Stock: Journalism and the Publicly Traded Newspaper Company*, (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 2001).

⁶⁴ Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue, “Corporate Ownership and Editor Attitudes About Business,” 259-66.

This notion suggests that corporate executives act as a sieve, allowing only profit-driven news items to seep through. That is, they are serving as gatekeepers controlling the flow of information received by the audience with a motive primarily of financial self interest.

Non-independent newspapers have often been viewed as placing profits and financial expectations above journalistic quality.⁶⁵ For example, Lacy, Shaver, and St. Cyr conducted a study concerning publicly owned newspaper groups and their effects on financial performance and competition.⁶⁶ Since publicly owned newspapers, as the study points out, have more constituencies than the traditional newspaper, they are more bound to profit concerns.⁶⁷ Instead of just answering to employees, readers, and advertisers, the publicly traded newspapers must answer to stockholders and financial analysts as well.⁶⁸ However, another study found that journalists from both group and individually owned newspapers did not see the newspapers' profit-seeking goals as negatively affecting coverage or information diversity.⁶⁹ Still, it is important to point out that just because journalists from group and independently owned papers did not differ much on their opinions, a "sizeable minority" of those responding recognized negative effects due to the profit goals.⁷⁰

⁶⁵ Lacy, Shaver, and St. Cyr, "Effects of Public Ownership and Competition on Financial Performance," 332-41; Busterna, "How Managerial Ownership Affects Profit Maximization," 301-25.

⁶⁶ Lacy, Shaver, and St. Cyr, "Effects of Public Ownership and Competition on Financial Performance," 332-41. See also, Blankenberg and Ozanich, "Effects of Public Ownership on Financial Performance," 68-75.

⁶⁷ Lacy, Shaver, and St. Cyr, "Effects of Public Ownership and Competition on Financial Performance," 339.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ David C. Coulson, "Impact of Ownership on Newspaper Quality," *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (summer 1994): 408.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Other studies of newspaper profit maximizing goals deal with different authority positions and managerial roles, and show conflicting results. A study on types of managerial ownership and its effects on profit goals found that non-owner newspaper managers placed more emphasis on building profits than owner managers.⁷¹ This finding contrasts economic theory, which holds that owner managers place higher emphasis on profits, but supports many journalists' contentions.⁷² Additionally, results suggest that local newspaper owners seem to be in business for reasons beyond maximizing profits.⁷³

Again, this idea of profit focus by chain newspapers has had different findings. In their 1985 survey of Minnesota editors, Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue found that editors of locally owned, individual newspapers are more concerned with profits than group owned counterparts.⁷⁴ The authors maintain that this concern is most likely because editors at individual papers often have to serve two separate roles of editor and owner.⁷⁵ This contention, then, would seem to contrast the study discussed earlier that suggested non-owner managers placed greater emphasis on profits.⁷⁶ This contradiction can most likely be attributed to different methodologies and sample size. For example, the study concerning managers used a direct survey in order to measure attitudes toward

⁷¹ Busterna, "How Managerial Ownership Affects Profit Maximization," 307.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 306.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 307.

⁷⁴ Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue, "Corporate Ownership and Editor Attitudes About Business," 264.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁷⁶ Busterna, "How Managerial Ownership Affects Profit Maximization," 307.

maximizing profits and consisted of a small sample size.⁷⁷ The Minnesota study used an interview method of editors analyzing ownership while using a much larger sample size.⁷⁸ A similar study found that *publishers* [emphasis added] of publicly owned chains placed greater emphasis on profits than privately owned chain publishers.⁷⁹ The study is worth mentioning even though it did not take into account non-chain newspapers because it gives more insight to the practices of publicly owned chains.

Homogenization of Content

One of the most debated claims concerning media ownership concentration is that it causes a homogenization of the news. That is, non-independent newspapers are usually charged with duplicating news content throughout their chain which, in turn, leads to uniformity in both editorial views and spins taken on certain issues. Several studies have taken on the issue of news standardization finding different results.

Hicks and Featherston found no significant opinion or feature content duplication among Louisiana newspapers under different forms of ownership.⁸⁰ Additionally, Wagenberg and Soderland discovered no theme selection or partisanship standardization throughout chain newspapers in the 1972 Canadian Federal election.⁸¹ Other studies concerning political issues found otherwise.⁸² For example, Akhavan-Majid, Rife, and

⁷⁷ Ibid., 304-05.

⁷⁸ Olien, Tichenor, and Donohue, "Corporate Ownership and Editor Attitudes About Business," 263.

⁷⁹ Matthews, "How Public Ownership Affects Publisher Autonomy," 351.

⁸⁰ Hicks and Featherston, "Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations," 551, 553.

⁸¹ Ronald H. Wagenberg and Walter C. Soderlund, "The Influence of Chain-Ownership on Editorial Comment in Canada," *Journalism Quarterly* 52 (spring 1975): 98.

Gopinath examined Gannett versus similar non-Gannett papers in their study of ownership involving national political issues in 1989.⁸³ The researchers compared editorial positions taken on three predetermined public issues by 56 Gannett newspapers and 155 other newspapers.⁸⁴ They found that chain ownership causes standardization on policy issues and editorial positions, although the Gannett papers were more likely to take positions.⁸⁵ However, the authors of the study warned that research on a different set of public issues and additional chains need to be explored before their findings can be generalized.⁸⁶ This warning can be attributed to the examination of only one chain and a limited set of issues.

Differences in findings among these studies can be explained through variations including, but not limited to, location, time period, and samples studied. For example, two obvious differences can be noted between the two political issue studies of Wagenberg and Soderlund and Akhavan-Majid, Rife, and Gopinath. First, the studies took place in two different countries. This observation does not serve to discredit the former study because behaviors of chains are most likely going to be comparable within similar parts of the world. Second, the studies took place at two different time periods; the former in the 1970s and the latter in the late 1980s. Another probable cause of the

⁸² Roya Akhavan-Majid, Anita Rife, and Sheila Gopinath, "Chain Ownership and Editorial Independence: A Case Study of Gannett Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 68 (spring/summer 1991): 59-66; Daniel Wackman, Donald Gillmor, Cecilie Gaziano, and Everette Dennis, "Chain Newspaper Autonomy as Reflected in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," *Journalism Quarterly* 52 (autumn 1975): 411-19.

⁸³ Akhavan-Majid, Rife, and Gopinath, "Chain Ownership and Editorial Independence," 59-66.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

contrasting findings is the distinct sample size differentiation, which seems to be a factor in most conflicting studies.

Another study related to uniformity is Glasser, Allen, and Blanks' study of chain ownership influence on news play.⁸⁷ They found that Knight-Ridder chain newspapers not only gave more "play" to the Gary Hart story, but more extensive homogeneity in front page "play" than non-affiliated newspapers.⁸⁸ "Play" refers to the location and news hole size dedicated to the story. This finding suggests that chain newspapers may exert organizational gatekeeping forces on their member newspapers. That is, organizational routines, according to Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchical model, can nudge other members of the chain to "play up" a story more.⁸⁹ This seems especially evident in the Gary Hart story case because a major Knight-Ridder newspaper broke the story.

Content Quality

Another highly examined area of research is the effect of ownership on news content quality. One interesting study analyzed the news content of the Louisville Courier-Journal after purchase by Gannett.⁹⁰ In their study, Coulson and Hansen found that when measured against the increased size of the news hole, hard news coverage actually decreased.⁹¹ According to Coulson and Hansen, hard news coverage offers

⁸⁷ Glasser, Allen, and Blanks, "The Influence of Chain Ownership On News Play: A Case Study," 607-14.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 612-13.

⁸⁹ Shoemaker and Reese, *Mediating the Message*,

⁹⁰ David C. Coulson and Anne Hansen, "The Louisville Courier-Journal's News Content after Purchase by Gannett," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 72 (spring 1995): 205-15.

readers a better chance to inform themselves on serious topics.⁹² In contrast, Demers' study tested a theory of corporate newspaper effects, which included product quality.⁹³ Demers found that newspapers possessing more corporate characteristics actually place *greater* [emphasis added] emphasis on product quality.⁹⁴

The contrasting findings of the studies can best be explained by the different sample sizes, time periods of the samples, and methods. The first study focused on just one newspaper during longer time periods while the latter used data from several newspapers during a much shorter time period. For example, Coulson and Hansen conducted a longitudinal study of the Louisville Courier-Journal's content during two periods: two years prior to Gannett's purchase and two years following change of ownership.⁹⁵ Demers, on the other hand, mailed questionnaires and studied editorial and opinion page tear sheets of 223 newspapers over a two-day period.⁹⁶ Although the sample size in Demers' study was clearly larger, the time period examined was much shorter than the earlier study.

⁹¹ Ibid., 210. According to this study by Coulson and Hansen, news hole refers to non-advertising space excluding the masthead, flag, folios, and standing section heads, but including display and classified content. Hard news coverage refers to event or decision-oriented stories concerning subjects such as government, the economy, or international affairs.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ David Pearce Demers, *The Menace of the Corporate Newspaper: Fact or Fiction?*, (Ames, Iowa: Ames University Press, 1996): 277-302.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 294.

⁹⁵ Coulson and Hansen, "Louisville Courier-Journal's Content," 207.

⁹⁶ Demers, *Menace of the Corporate Newspaper*, 278.

Editorial Content and Vigor

One of the most explored avenues of research concerning media concentration of ownership is its effects on editorial content. Studies investigating newspaper ownership's effects on editorial aggressiveness have produced conflicting results. In his study of West Coast newspapers, Thrift found that vigor in the editorials of independently owned dailies declined after being purchased by chains.⁹⁷ Yet, newspapers that remained independent during the same periods increased in vigor.⁹⁸ This finding falls in line with other evidence suggesting that group purchase of newspapers does not necessarily serve as a benefit to readers.⁹⁹ Similarly, in their study of chain editorial autonomy during presidential campaigns, Wackman, Gillmore, Gaziano, and Dennis suggested that chain ownership discouraged editorial independence when endorsing candidates.¹⁰⁰ This suggestion, then, would translate into a decrease in editorial vigor.

In contrast, Akhavan-Majid and Boudreau's study of the impact of chain ownership on content found that chain ownership may not have a significant effect on editorial role perceptions.¹⁰¹ Editorial role perceptions refer to the manner in which newspaper editors identify their editorial mission.¹⁰² In fact, the study's findings suggest

⁹⁷ Ralph R. Thrift, Jr., "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor of Newspapers." *Journalism Quarterly* 54 (summer 1977): 329.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Gerald L. Grotta, "Consolidation of Newspapers: What Happens to the Consumer?," *Journalism Quarterly* 48 (summer 1971): 245-50; Coulson and Hansen, "The Louisville Courier-Journal's Content after Purchase by Gannett," 205-15; Hicks and Featherston, "Content in Contrasting Ownership Situations," 549-53.

¹⁰⁰ Wackman et al., "Chain Autonomy in Presidential Campaign Endorsements," 420.

¹⁰¹ Roya Akhavan-Majid and Timothy Boudreau, "Chain Ownership, Organizational Size, and Editorial Role Perceptions," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 72 (winter 1995): 871.

¹⁰² Ibid., 863.

that as the size of the chain increases, activist values of the editors increase.¹⁰³ These activist values, in turn, mean a higher level of aggressiveness. Demers' study of the effect of corporate newspaper structure on editorial page vigor found that newspapers showing characteristics of the corporate form produced a higher number and proportion of staff-generated editorials.¹⁰⁴ Newspapers exhibiting those characteristics also published a greater number and proportion of editorials and letters to the editor that were critical of mainstream groups or values, a trait he applied to editorial page vigor.¹⁰⁵ However, his study suggested no significant relationship between editorial-page content and chain ownership.¹⁰⁶

Still, other studies have generated mixed results or few differences at all. For example, Wagenberg and Soderlund found that socio-cultural issues, local interests, and editorial writer preferences were more influential in editorial coverage than type of ownership.¹⁰⁷ In fact, they found neither consistent patterns uniting the Free Press chain, nor persistent differences between the chain and independent papers.¹⁰⁸ In another study, Grotta found no significant differences between independent and chain ownership

¹⁰³ Ibid., 870.

¹⁰⁴ David Demers, "Corporate Newspaper Structure, Editorial Page Vigor, and Social Change," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 73 (winter 1996): 868-9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 870.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Wagenberg and Soderlund, "The Influence of Chain-Ownership on Editorial Comment in Canada," 96.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 94.

situations.¹⁰⁹ The study examined the effect of newspaper concentration of ownership under varying situations and the potential benefits passed onto consumers.

The contrasting findings can be attributed to a few different factors, namely time period, samples studied, and methods. The most obvious factors are the differences in time periods and methods. For example, examine Thrift's study in comparison to that of Akhavan-Majid and Boudreau's. Thrift studied and coded editorials from two different time periods: 1960 and 1975, while Akhavan-Majid and Boudreau drew a sample of editors from the 1992 Editor and Publisher yearbook. It is important to point out that the earlier study used a method of coding editorials from prior newspapers while the latter relied on questionnaire information obtained from different editors. It is equally important to mention the differentiation of samples studied. Thrift compared editorial content of newspapers which were independently owned in 1960 but were purchased by a chain by 1975. Akhavan-Majid and Boudreau's study relied on information obtained solely from chain newspapers.

What Makes a Good Editorial Page?

Before delving into the main premise of the study, editorial page vigor, it is important to ask one question: What makes a good editorial page? Ernest Hynds' studies have helped shed light on the changing roles of editorials and editorial pages. In his 1983 study on the vital roles of opinion pages, a follow-up to his 1975 research, Hynds mailed a four-page questionnaire to 25% of the nation's daily newspapers.¹¹⁰ He found that 97% of all surveyed editors agreed that the editorial page should provide a forum for the

¹⁰⁹ Grotta, "Consolidation of Newspapers: What Happens to the Consumer?," 250.

exchange of information and opinion, while 94% agreed it should give leadership to the community through stands on issues.¹¹¹ In Simurda's 1997 study of opinion pages, Edward C. Jones, managing editor and former editorial editor of *The Free Lance-Star* in Fredericksburg, Virginia said, "There is a great hunger among people to listen to an informed and reasoned voice to help them sort things out. Taking positions strongly and clearly is what we need to be doing."¹¹²

In regards to editorials alone, Hynds' found that 84% of the surveyed editors claimed that the editorials help readers in making judgments, 60% said they reinforced opinions already held, and 32% said they caused readers to change their minds on issues.¹¹³ Editorial experts in Simurda's study agreed that when an editorial taps an issue that is important to its readers and makes a strong statement, it can still play a big role in shaping public opinion and political decisions.¹¹⁴ In Simurda's research, Michael G. Gartner, editor of *The Daily Tribune* in Ames, Iowa, and winner of the 1997 Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing simply claimed that you can't have a good editorial without facts.¹¹⁵ According to the study, this leads the editorial writers back to doing more reporting.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁰ Ernest Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," *Journalism Quarterly* 61 (autumn 1984): 634-39.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 635.

¹¹² Stephen J. Simurda, "Trying to Make Editorials Sing," *Columbia Journalism Review* 36 (September/October 1997): 47.

¹¹³ Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," 636.

¹¹⁴ Simurda, "Trying to Make Editorials Sing," 48.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

Almost all newspapers use columns on their editorials pages.¹¹⁷ However, the reasoning behind the selection of columns seems to vary. Hynds' studies suggest that political analyses are the most popular and that most newspapers rely on syndicates for their columns.¹¹⁸ However, the use of syndicates does not necessarily mean a better editorial page. In Simurda's more recent study, John Zakarian, editorial page editor of The Hartford Courant, said, "[Syndicated columnists] are just a cheap way to put out an editorial page."¹¹⁹ To move away from this, some newspapers editors have sought columns from people within their communities.¹²⁰ This trend could suggest that newspaper staffs are looking for stories that are locally focused and, in turn, spark a higher interest in readers. In fact, the editors in Hynds' studies said they selected columnists for their ability to draw readers, rather than for their philosophies.¹²¹ Moreover, a mere 6% of editors in Hynds' 1992 survey claimed to run columnists with philosophies similar to those of the newspaper, as compared to 13% of the editors surveyed in 1983.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," 637; Ernest C. Hynds, "Editors at Most U.S. Dailies See Vital Roles for Editorial Page," *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (autumn 1994): 577.

¹¹⁸ Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," 637; Hynds, "Editors at Most U.S. Dailies See Vital Roles for Editorial Page," *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (autumn 1994): 577-78.

¹¹⁹ Simurda, "Trying to Make Editorials Sing," 49.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," 637; Hynds, "Editors at Most U.S. Dailies See Vital Roles for Editorial Page," *Journalism Quarterly* 71 (autumn 1994): 578.

¹²² Ibid.

Letters to the editor were ranked the best-read item on the editorial page by the editors surveyed in Hynds' 1983 study.¹²³ In fact, in Simurda's analysis, Ken Neal, editorial page editor of the Tulsa World in Oklahoma said, "I'd like to think readers can't wait to read the editorials, but I know they really read the letters."¹²⁴ And, according to Hynds' research, newspapers have been publishing more letters to the editor over the years of his studies. In 1975, 95% of the surveyed editors received at least 100 letters per year, as compared to 98% in 1983 and 100% in 1992.¹²⁵ Most editors in the 1992 survey claimed to print the same percentage of letters, which meant more letters than in past years.¹²⁶ Newspapers' staffs, then, have most likely realized that publishing their readers' voices is the best way to lure them to read other editorial page items such as editorials and columns.

A Closer Look at Editorial Page Vigor

The basis of this research comes from a curiosity spurred after reading Thrift's study on editorial vigor. Thrift coded 24 West Coast dailies' editorials for two different time periods between 1960 and 1975.¹²⁷ The study followed ownership patterns of these newspapers, which changed from independent to chain ownership during the time periods, to track possible changes in editorial vigor.¹²⁸ Rather than defining editorial

¹²³ Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," 635.

¹²⁴ Simurda, "Trying to Make Editorials Sing," 52.

¹²⁵ Hynds, "Editors at Most U.S. Dailies See Vital Roles for Editorial Page," 579.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Thrift, "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor," 328.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

vigor, Thrift assigned attributes suggested by editorial writers and authors of texts on editorials.¹²⁹ From his initial background research, Thrift decided that in order for an editorial to be considered vigorous it should 1) focus on a local topic, 2) be written in the argumentative form, 3) have a controversial context, and 4) provide mobilizing information.¹³⁰

Thrift's study is limited, however, because it examined editorials alone, which only make up one aspect of the editorial page. The current study tested not only the editorials, but letters to the editor and editorial page columns as well. Additionally, different characteristics were assigned to form a new basis for editorial page vigor, including mainly those from Demers' study. This is the first known study to include columns in examining the vigor of the editorial page.

Columns are important to include in any study of editorial page vigor because the views and information expressed by the columnists have the opportunity to sway opinion and, therefore, have an impact on a community. Tony Marrow, editor of the late New York Newsday, contends in a 2002 article by Brian Toolan that "With so much raw data and information being hurled at citizens from so many different outlets....there is a case to be made that columnists are more important than ever, bringing insight, perspective and reasoned argument to bear. And when they're at their best, they do it in a framework that...captures the mood, pace and tone of the city they're based in."¹³¹

¹²⁹ Ibid., 327.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Brian Toolan, "What Ever Happened to the Local Columnists?," www.asne.org/search/index.cfm, Accessed on 04-22-03: 4-5.

Letters to the editor is another editorial page item excluded from Thrift's study. This item is clearly one that should not be overlooked because it provides readers the opportunity to have their voices heard. According to MacDougall, it is the best-read feature on the editorial page.¹³² By encouraging readers to express their opinions, newspapers keep in better touch with the public and can measure the effectiveness of its own operation.¹³³ Demers included letters in his 1996 research, but chose to omit columns.¹³⁴

For the purposes of this study, editorials and columns were considered vigorous if the content 1) was critical of an issue associated with a mainstream individual or group, 2) was focused on a local issue, and/or 3) was staff-produced. Letters to the editor were considered vigorous if the content was critical of an issue associated with a mainstream individual or group. These characteristics will be discussed more thoroughly in the methods section.

¹³² Curtis D. MacDougall, *Principles of Editorial Writing*, (Dubuque, Iowa: WM. C. Brown Co., 1973): 141.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ Demers, "Corporate Newspaper Structure, Editorial Page Vigor, and Social Change," 857-77.

CHAPTER THREE

HYPOTHESES

In reviewing the evidence examined in the literature review above, the author hypothesized that before their purchase by a non-independent, independently owned daily newspapers will show more editorial page vigor. That is, prior to change of ownership, the independent dailies will:

H1: publish more staff-produced editorials.

H2: publish more staff-produced columns.

H3: publish more editorials that are critical of mainstream groups.

H4: publish more columns that are critical of mainstream groups.

H5: publish more editorials that are focused on local issues.

H6: publish more columns that are focused on local issues.

H7: publish more letters to the editor.

H8: publish more letters to the editor that are critical of mainstream groups.

CHAPTER FOUR

METHODS

All West Virginia daily newspapers that changed from independent to non-independent ownership from 1965 to present were included in this study; a total of seven newspapers. West Virginia daily newspapers were chosen because the author sought to determine whether newspapers in a more rural, economically challenged state follow similar trends as those in similar parts of the country.

In order to be included in the study, a newspaper had to 1) publish an opinion/editorial page at least one time per week and 2) be a West Virginia daily newspaper that moved from independent to non-independent ownership from 1965 to present. Only the first change of ownership was considered. For example, suppose that a newspaper was independently owned in 1965, purchased by a chain in 1968 and then purchased by a different chain in 1970. For the purposes of this study, only the first change of ownership from independent to non-independent was examined, which would be the purchase in 1968.

A *daily newspaper* is defined as any newspaper that publishes at least five times per week. Those newspapers that collaborated with another for Saturday and/or Sunday issues were also included in the study. Additionally, only newspapers that were in publication at the time of the study were used. However, if a *portion* of the newspaper was still in existence at the time of analysis, it was considered. For example, the Raleigh Register was no longer a sole publication during the time of research. However, it was included because, after the sample period, it merged with the Beckley Post Herald to

form the Beckley Register-Herald, which was still in existence at the time of the study. Therefore, a portion of the Raleigh Register was still published during this examination and, hence, qualified for analysis.

Two categories of ownership were addressed in this study: independent and non-independent. Ownership was determined by consulting the West Virginia Secretary of State's office and website, speaking with individuals from the newspapers, examining the West Virginia Blue Books, and referring to anniversary editions of the newspapers.¹³⁵

An *independent newspaper*, also known as "individual" or "family-owned," is defined as one under private ownership that is not associated with a private or public chain or group. It is a single newspaper that is owned and managed by the same individual or family.¹³⁶ If an individual or family owns and/or manages more than one newspaper, the publication is not considered independent. The exception in this study is the Raleigh Register. The Hodel family owned both the Beckley Post-Herald and the Raleigh Register, both in the same region. The Hodels sold the two newspapers, which later merged, to Clay Communications. Since the papers were sold together and the Raleigh Register is only in partial existence today as the Beckley Register-Herald, it was considered an independent for the purposes of this study.

A *non-independent newspaper* is defined as a chain or group newspaper in the same or different cities under the same ownership or control. If an individual or family owns and/or manages more than one newspaper, the publication is considered non-

¹³⁵ The West Virginia Blue Books are reference items published each year by the state. The books offer information about the state's government, political subdivisions, county facts and figures, officials, holidays, media entities, etc.

¹³⁶ Demers, "Corporate Newspaper Structure, Editorial Page Vigor, and Social Change," 858.

independent. For the purposes of this study, as soon as the individual or family purchases a newspaper other than their flagship publication, they change from independent to a non-independent ownership status. Newspapers that are publicly owned or publicly traded entities are also included as non-independents.¹³⁷

The study also provides an analysis of the individual newspapers. This will provide a better understanding of the effects of chain size or type when examining editorial page vigor as compared to independent newspapers.

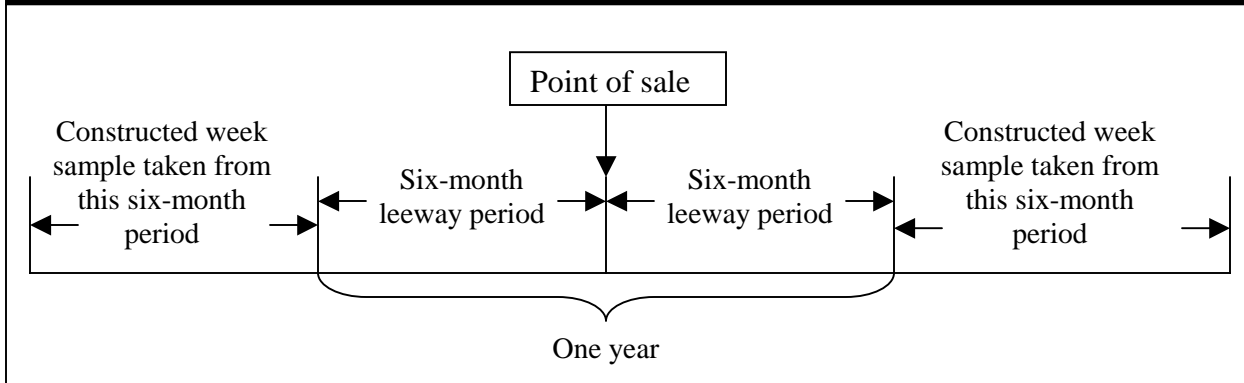
As with Thrift's study, the editorial page was coded for two time periods: prior to the purchase by a chain and after purchase by a chain.¹³⁸ Two constructed one-week periods were selected from each newspaper in the study.¹³⁹ The first constructed one-week sample was derived from a six-month period, which was at least six months but not more than 12 months, prior to the point of sale. The six months immediately prior to the point of sale were not coded since talks of the sale may have already begun and, therefore, possibly affected the editorial page's content. A six-month leeway period from the point of sale was then allowed for the "settling in" of new ownership. The second constructed one-week sample was derived from the six month period, which was at least six months but not more than 12 months, after the after the point of sale. A visual explanation of the leeway and sample periods is shown in Chart 1.

¹³⁷ According to Matthews, a publicly owned or traded newspaper shares characteristics of a chain, except that shares of the newspapers' stock are issued and traded on stock exchanges.

¹³⁸ Thrift, "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor," 328.

¹³⁹ Each day was pulled at random from a six-month period, at least six months but not more than 12 months, prior to the ownership change until two one-week periods were obtained for each newspaper. That is, all Mondays in a given newspaper's six-month time period were placed in a hat and one Monday was drawn (the remaining days of the week followed suit until a constructed one-week period was drawn). The same method was used for the constructed one-week period after the change in ownership.

CHART 1. Sampling Time Period



Two constructed one-week samples for each newspaper were chosen, as opposed to random or consecutive day samples, due to information obtained from Riffe, Aust, and Lacy's study of effectiveness in sample methods in newspaper analysis.¹⁴⁰ They found that constructed week samples produce better estimates than *random sampling* [emphasis added] because they avoid the possibility of over representing Saturdays or Sundays.¹⁴¹ Additionally, the authors point out that although *consecutive day* [emphasis added] samples are convenient to use, they are not reliable in estimating content for periods of six months or longer.¹⁴² Overall findings suggested that one constructed week was as efficient as four for a population of six months of editions.¹⁴³ In fact, Riffe, Aust, and Lacy's found that 100% of the constructed week sample means (compared to 70%-85% for consecutive day and 85%-95% for simple random sampling) fell within two standard

¹⁴⁰ Daniel Riffe, Charles F. Aust and Stephen R. Lacy, "The Effectiveness of Random, Consecutive Day and Constructed Week Sampling in Newspaper Content Analysis," *Journalism Quarterly* 70 (spring 1993): 133-39.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

errors of the population means.¹⁴⁴

Instead of examining only editorials, or even a combination of editorials and letters to the editor as in Demers' research,¹⁴⁵ this study focused on the content of the entire editorial page. That is, editorials, letters to the editor, and columns. As mentioned earlier, this is the first known study to consider columns as a part of the editorial page vigor measure.

Editorials and columns were coded for categories derived from Demers' 1996 study.¹⁴⁶ The categories include geographic focus, critical evaluation, and origin. Letters to the editor were coded for one category: critical evaluation. Origin was not included since all letters are non-staff. Geographic focus was not coded because, in a pilot study, a single letter often covered several issues affecting more than one region.

Geographic focus of editorials and columns were coded as *local* or *non-local*. Both Thrift and Demers applied this category to their research but with different classifications. Dichotomous categories were used as in Demers' study because in a pilot investigation it was difficult to distinguish between state and local foci. It was perhaps even more difficult to determine the difference between national and international foci. In most cases editorials and columns had to be read several times and even then placement was questionable.

A *local* editorial or column had a main focus that dealt with matters affecting or concerning the community or state in which the newspaper is published. Issues affecting

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 138.

¹⁴⁵ Demers, "Corporate Newspaper Structure, Editorial Page Vigor, and Social Change," 857-77.

¹⁴⁶ Demers, "Corporate Newspaper Structure, Editorial Page Vigor, and Social Change," 857-77.

or concerning a community of a bordering state that is a part of a newspaper's primary market were considered local. For example, the Bluefield Daily Telegraph is published in southern West Virginia and has a primary market area that includes Tazewell County, Virginia. An editorial that covered issues affecting Tazewell County was considered local since the newspaper has a major presence in that market. A *non-local* editorial or column had a main theme that dealt with issues affecting or concerning 1) a city outside the newspaper's primary circulation area, 2) a U.S. state outside the newspaper's primary circulation area, 3) the U.S. as a whole, 4) a foreign country, or 5) made no reference to a geographic location. Examples of editorial page items lacking a geographic focus include editorials or columns that involved an event or topic, but did not necessarily concern or affect a particular geographic area.

Critical evaluation was composed of whether or not the editorial, letter to the editor, or column was critical or non-critical in the way it evaluated an action, rule, law, decision, position, value, idea, ideology, custom or practice associated with a *mainstream individual or group*.¹⁴⁷

An editorial page item was *critical* if it contained content that was faulting, blaming, censuring or disapproving.¹⁴⁸ Additionally, if the item's content was presented in a sarcastic or sardonic manner, it was considered critical. If the item consisted of content that was commending, applauding, approving or admiring, or contained content that appeared to be equally balanced, it was coded as *non-critical*.¹⁴⁹ Moreover an

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 867.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 867-8.

editorial page item was coded as *non-critical* if it contained no reference to a mainstream group, value, etc.¹⁵⁰

This study followed Demers' definition of *mainstream*, which is an individual or group associated with *local, state, or federal government, the two main political parties, private business and corporations, or mainstream churches*.¹⁵¹ Two additional groups were added for this analysis: labor, namely coal mining, unions and the individual newspapers under study. Labor unions were considered mainstream because a heavy labor influence was present in West Virginia; it is still today. The northern and southern regions of the state, in particular, were and still are home to many coal mines and coal mining unions.

Individual newspapers were included as mainstream since they are considered an important asset to the communities in which they serve. If an editorial page item was critical or non-critical of the newspaper in which it is printed, the publication was considered a mainstream group. This particular branch of mainstream usually pertains solely to letters to the editor. However, disparagement aimed at other newspapers or the media in general were not included since it is easy to criticize a non-local newspaper or the media in general because they are not in the immediate community or "close to home."

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. In his initial evaluation, Demers classified critical evaluation as positive, negative, neutral and non-applicable. Due to low intercoder reliability (64% agreement), he chose to dichotomize the measure into two categories: critical vs. non-critical (negative vs. positive, neutral and non-applicable). This change resulted in a 100% reliability coefficient.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. Demers' examples of *local, state, or federal government* include the following: city hall, police, schools, Congress, the President, courts, colleges, mayor, governor, state agencies, city council members, etc. Foreign governments and/or foreign political parties were not considered mainstream in this study. The *two main political parties* are Democrat and Republican. *Mainstream churches* include Catholic, mainstream protestant, or Jewish. Christianity, in general, was added in this study as a part of mainstream churches. Private business and corporations are self-explanatory.

Critical evaluation for editorials, columns and letters to the editor that covered more than one issue was determined according to the dominant theme. That is, the topic with the most devoted column inches.

Another of Demers' coding categories, *origin*, was used.¹⁵² However, for this project the author chose to classify the types of origin differently. An editorial item was coded as *staff* if it was written by someone from the newspaper under study. As with Demers' study, *staff* classification was determined by either absence of bylines, in the case of editorials, or identifiable staff writer with the presence of a byline.¹⁵³ Editorials and columns that were not written by a staff member, but were submitted by an independent writer exclusively for the newspaper under study, were classified as staff.

A second classification of origin, *syndicated*, was reserved for editorial page items that were obtained from a wire service, syndicates, other newspapers, or sources other than staff. This classification includes syndicated columnists, wire service news stories, and syndicated or "canned" editorials in addition to editorials obtained from other papers. The "canned" editorials and editorials from other newspapers were identified by an editor's note or another acknowledgment stating either the name of the contributing syndicate or the name of the contributing newspaper. Moreover, columns and editorials that were obtained from the non-independent newspapers' wire or news service were coded as syndicated. For example, the Gannett-owned Huntington Herald-Dispatch ran a column that was acquired from the company's wire service. It was coded as syndicated since it may have run in the chain's other newspapers as well. As mentioned earlier, the

¹⁵² Ibid., 868. Demers refers to this category as *source* in his study.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

author chose not to code letters to the editor for origin because all were written by non-staff. Moreover, origin of letters to the editor was not taken into account for vigor in the current study.

A Note on Editorials and Columns

At one point, the Associated Press compiled a list of editorials from around the state that was used in some newspapers, especially those without editorial content. For example, the (Keyser) Mineral Daily News-Tribune published editorials pages only a couple of days per week. Only one edition out of the sample published a staff-produced editorial. On other occasions, the newspaper used a list of opinion/editorials from around the state in place of running its own editorials. Since the list was clearly labeled as a compilation of opinion pieces, the items were coded as editorials. However, when other newspapers in the study produced a somewhat similar list without the clear label of “editorials,” they were not coded as editorials. For example, the Raleigh Register ran two pieces entitled, “What Other Papers are Saying,” which included information from papers outside of the state. Since the items were not clearly labeled as opinion pieces and the newspaper already had included its own editorials, the items were not coded as editorials. Moreover, the items were not coded as columns, since they simply consisted of blurbs from other newspapers without clear distinction of the type of piece. Therefore, these items were omitted.

For the purposes of this study the following columns were not considered a factor in the editorial page vigor measure and, therefore, were not included: 1) astrology columns, 2) advice or question and answer columns, 3) quips from Will Rogers, 4) excerpts from novels, short stories, or any other type of literature, and 5) book reviews.

Some columns seemed to be used as filler or appeared to belong in other sections of the paper and, therefore, were not coded.¹⁵⁴ For example, the Logan Banner ran an astrology column on their editorial page. The item, which should normally run in the entertainment section, was not coded. For the purposes of this study, it was not appropriate to compare Sydney Omarr's "Astrocast" to Jack Anderson's political column in terms of editorial page vigor. Instead the item was omitted from the study.

Another example is Billy Graham's religious advice column. The researcher believed the column was used on the editorial pages of the Logan Banner and the Beckley Post-Herald solely when they had space to fill. Graham's column, although popular, would have been more appropriately placed on the religion or society pages. In fact, Hynds found that the number of newspapers using religion columnists on the editorial pages declined from 20% in 1975 to 9% in 1983.¹⁵⁵ The drop is because most newspapers have moved this type of column to another section.¹⁵⁶

The Logan Banner ran a medical advice column entitled, "The Doctor Says." This column, however, took different forms. Most of the time, the column took a question and answer/advice format. In this case, the column was not coded in terms of editorial page vigor because, as mentioned earlier, advice columns were not considered. Similar to the religion columnists, Hynds found that the number of newspapers using advice columns on the editorial pages declined from 13% in 1975 to 6% in 1983.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁴ Filler refers to newspaper copy with little or no news value that is used to fill space in a publication.

¹⁵⁵ Hynds, "Editorials, Opinion Pages Still Have Vital Roles at Most Newspapers," 637.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

Again, the decline is due to this type of column being moved to another section.¹⁵⁸ On a few occasions, “The Doctor Says” took an expository instead of an advice form. That is, it explained an event, situation, or process. In these cases, the column was included.

Short excerpts by Will Rogers were not included in this study. Since the items did not consist of Rogers’ column in its entirety, it did not seem appropriate to include and compare to other full-length columns. For example, the Beckley Post-Herald included quips by Will Rogers in more than one issue under examination. All excerpts were selected and edited by a third party and most of the quips, not including the headline and picture, were less than three inches in length. While Will Rogers’ full column was important during its time, the shortened selections were not considered suitable items for an editorial page vigor analysis.

Excerpts from short stories or novels were other columns excluded from the study. These pieces were obtained from the author and distributed by Newspaper Enterprise Association. This item is best explained as a “...to be continued” feature. The Logan Banner was the only newspaper in the study that ran this type of column. These columns did not appear in the sample editions once the newspaper changed to non-independent ownership. Since the excerpts would have been more appropriately placed on the entertainment page and appeared to be used as filler, they were not considered in this editorial page vigor analysis.

The final type of column eliminated from the study was book reviews. Since these articles simply reviewed a piece of literature, comparing them to the most popular

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

types of editorial page columns did not make sense.¹⁵⁹ The Charleston Daily Mail was the lone newspaper to include book reviews on the editorial page: one while under independent ownership and one while under non-independent ownership. While the reviews offer an opinion on a book's literary quality, it seemed the newspaper was using them as fillers when they ran an op-ed page.

News stories that were placed on the editorial pages were omitted from this editorial page vigor analysis. While this occurrence was rare, it is important to point out for clarification purposes to aid future researchers.

¹⁵⁹ Hynds, "Editors at Most U.S. Dailies See Vital Roles for Editorial Page," 577-78. In his series of editor surveys, Hynds found the most popular featured editorial page column types were political analysis, political reporting, humorists, guest experts instead of columnists, and business columnists.

CHAPTER FIVE

RESULTS

Two constructed one-week samples from each newspaper yielded a total of 622 editorial page items: 165 editorials, 326 columns, and 131 letters to the editor. Overall, the results suggest no change in editorial vigor when newspapers changed from independent to non-independent ownership. However, vigor in terms of two of the eight hypotheses, geographic focus of editorials and number of letters to the editor, suggest an increase while operating under non-independent ownership.

Hypothesis 1, which suggested the newspapers under independent ownership would publish more staff-written editorials, was rejected. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of origin for both independent and non-independent ownership. The number of staff-written editorials decreased after the newspaper changed to non-independent ownership, as indicated in Table 1. However, that decrease was not significant ($X^2(1) = 2.020, p = .155$). Frequency of staff-produced editorials and type of ownership appear to be independent events and, therefore, suggest no change in editorial vigor. The newspapers, while under non-independent ownership, showed a rise in the number of syndicated editorials. But, again, this amount did not represent a significant increase.

Table 1. Percentages of Editorial Authorship by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Who wrote it	Staff	88.9%	81%
	Syndicated	11.1%	19%
Total		N = 81	N = 84

$X^2(1) = 2.020, p = .155, N = 165$

No significant change was detected in the number of staff-written columns leading to a rejection of Hypothesis 2. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of column origin for both independent and non-independent ownership. Although the number of columns written by staff increased after the newspaper moved to non-independent ownership, as illustrated in Table 2, the finding did not represent a significant difference ($X^2(1) = 2.274, p = .132$). Thus, frequency of staff-written columns and type of ownership appear to be independent events. This finding suggests that there is no significant change in vigor as the newspapers moved from independent to non-independent ownership. And, while the amount of syndicated columns decreased once the newspaper was under non-independent ownership, the change was not large enough to represent a significant finding. Since no significant change was detected, the finding suggests no change in column vigor as the newspapers moved from independent to non-independent ownership.

Table 2. Percentages of Column Authorship by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Who wrote it	Staff	17.9%	24.7%
	Syndicated	82.1%	75.3%
Total		N = 168	N = 158

$X^2(1) = 2.274, p = .132, N = 326$

Hypothesis 3, which predicted that under independent ownership the paper would publish more editorials that were critical of mainstream groups, was rejected because no change was detected. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of critical editorials for both independent and non-independent ownership situations. While the number of critical editorials increased slightly, as indicated in

Table 3, the rise did not account for a significant change ($X^2(1) = .777, p = .378$).

Frequency of critical editorials and type of ownership appear to be independent events and, therefore, suggest no change in editorial vigor as the newspapers moved from independent to non-independent ownership.

Table 3. Percentages of Editorial Critical Evaluation by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Critical Evaluation	Critical	42%	48.8%
	Non-critical	58%	51.2%
Total		N = 81	N = 84

$X^2(1) = .777, p = .378, N = 165$

Hypothesis 4 was rejected. It predicted that the dailies under independent ownership would publish more columns that were critical of mainstream individuals or groups. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of critical columns for both ownership situations. While the newspapers instead published more critical columns after the purchase by a non-independent, as indicated in Table 4, this change did not represent a significant finding ($X^2(1) = .688, p = .407$). Therefore, frequency of critical columns and type of ownership appear to be independent events. Hence, this finding suggests no change in column vigor.

Table 4. Percentages of Column Critical Evaluation by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Critical Evaluation	Critical	21.4%	25.3%
	Non-critical	78.6%	74.7%
Total		N = 168	N = 158

$X^2(1) = .688, p = .407, N = 326$

Hypothesis 5, which predicted that the dailies under independent ownership would publish more locally focused editorial, was rejected. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of editorials concerning local issues for both independent and non-independent ownership situations. After the purchase by a non-independent, the number of locally focused editorials increased, as illustrated in Table 5, and a significant interaction was found ($X^2(1) = 4.547, p = .033$). After moving to non-independent ownership, the newspapers were more likely to publish locally focused editorials than while under independent ownership. As a result, an increase in vigor, in terms of geographic focus of editorials, was detected.

Table 5. Percentages of Editorial Focus by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Geographic Focus	Local	37%	53.6%
	Non-local	63%	46.4%
Total		N = 81	N = 84

$X^2(1) = 4.547, p = .033, N = 165$

Hypothesis 6 was rejected because no significant change was detected. The hypothesis predicted that while under independent ownership, the dailies would publish more columns focused on local issues. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of locally focused columns and type of ownership situation. While the number of columns concerning local issues increased after the purchase by a non-independent, the margin of change was not significant ($X^2(1) = 2.913, p = .088$), as shown in Table 6. Therefore, frequency of locally focused columns and type of ownership situation appear to be independent events; they do not reflect a change in vigor.

Table 6. Percentages of Column Focus by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Geographic Focus	Local	14.3%	21.5%
	Non-local	85.7%	78.5%
Total		N = 168	N = 158

$X^2(1) = 2.913, p = .088, N = 326$

Hypothesis 7, which predicted that while under independent ownership the dailies would publish more letters to the editor, was rejected. As Table 7 illustrates, the newspapers published 56 letters while under independent ownership as compared to 75 after moving to non-independent ownership, an increase of 34%. This finding indicates that the newspapers exhibited a higher commitment to printing their readers' letters after, not before, the change to non-independent ownership, which, in turn, suggests an increase in vigor.

A significant change was not detected in the number of letters to the editor that were critical of mainstream individuals or groups, which led to a rejection of Hypothesis 8. A chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of critical letters to the editor and type of ownership situation. As Table 7 demonstrates, the newspapers published slightly more critical letters to the editor while under independent ownership, but the number did not account for a significant difference ($X^2(1) = .053, p = .818$). As a result, frequency of critical columns and type of ownership appear to be independent events. Therefore, no marked change in vigor was detected.

Table 7. Percentages of Letter Critical Evaluation by Ownership

		Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Critical Evaluation	Critical	44.6%	46.7%
	Non-critical	55.4%	53.3%
Total		N = 56	N = 75

$$X^2(1) = .053, p = .818, N = 131$$

A Look at the Individual Newspapers

When reviewed individually, most newspapers in the study exhibited similar results as the overall findings. However, there were some exceptions. Since, when broken down to individual newspapers, the sample sizes for each editorial page item were greatly reduced, the results of the chi-square tests for independence were difficult to generalize and were sometimes inappropriate. For some cases, the Fischer's Exact Test was more suitable in determining significance than the chi-square approximation. In those cases where one or more cells contained expected frequencies of five or less, the Fischer's Exact Test was used. This test provides a more accurate significance reading in 2 X 2 tables with low sample sizes.

Table 8. Beckley Post-Herald Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
	Columns	0.093	1	0.760
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
	Columns	0.715	1	0.398
	Letters	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
Geographic Focus	Editorial	0.381	1	0.537
	Column	0.002	1	0.967

Editorials: N = 23, Columns: N = 72, Letters: N = 10

The Beckley Post-Herald, which was owned by the Hodel family and purchased by Clay Communications, overall showed no significant changes in terms of editorial page vigor and ownership situation, as indicated in Table 8. When applied to each of this study's hypotheses, the frequency of item types and categories and the type of ownership situation appear to be independent events.

While operating under the independent ownership of the Hodel family, the Beckley Post-Herald published three letters to the editor. After moving to the non-independent ownership of Clay Communications, the paper published seven letters, an increase of 133%. This finding indicates that the chain owners showed a higher commitment of publishing their reader's letters (rejection of Hypothesis 7) than the independent owners, which suggests an increase in vigor like that of the overall study.

The newspaper differed from the overall analysis regarding geographic focus of editorials (Hypothesis 5), however. While vigor increased in total sample in terms of locally focused editorials, the Beckley Post-Herald exhibited no significant change ($X^2(1) = .381, p = .537$), as indicated in Table 8. This indicates no change in vigor in terms of geographic focus of editorials.

Table 9. Bluefield Daily Telegraph Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials			*
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.088
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		0.406
	Columns	0.005	1	0.942
	Letters	0.991	1	0.319
Geographic Focus	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		.022**
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.088

Editorials: N = 20, Columns: N = 37, Letters: N = 38

* No statistics were computed because Origin is a constant; all editorials were staff-written.

** Significant at the .05 level.

The Bluefield Daily Telegraph showed different results. As illustrated in Table 9, geographic focus of editorials yielded a significant change (Fischer's $p = .022$). A closer look at the data in Table 10 suggest that editorial vigor, in terms of geographic focus of editorials, increased after the paper was purchased by Worrell Newspapers based out of Virginia. In fact, while under independent ownership, the Bluefield Daily Telegraph published only two editorials that were focused on local issues as compared to seven while under non-independent ownership; an increase of 250%. As a result, the newspaper reduced the number of non-local editorials by 77% after the purchase by Worrell Newspapers.

Table 10. Percentages of Editorial Focus by Ownership

		Bluefield Daily Telegraph Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Geographic Focus	Local	18.2%	77.8%
	Non-local	81.8%	22.2%
Total		N = 11	N = 9

Significant at the .05 level, $N = 20$

The findings from this newspaper, then, fall in line with the results of the overall analysis. That is, instead of publishing more locally focused editorials under independent ownership, as predicted in Hypothesis 5, the Bluefield Daily Telegraph published more locally focused editorials after moving to non-independent ownership. However, since the sample size of the individual paper is so small, the results are difficult to generalize. Researchers must use caution when reporting findings of a small sample ($N = 20$), such as that of the Bluefield Daily Telegraph's editorials. To obtain a broader view of the individual newspaper, a larger sample should be examined.

The individual analysis of the newspaper indicates a different finding regarding number of letters to the editor (Hypothesis 7) when compared to the overall sample. While under the ownership of the Shott family, the newspaper published 23 letters as compared to 15 under the ownership of the Worrell chain; a 35% decrease. This finding, then, suggests a decrease in vigor, in terms of the Bluefield Daily Telegraph's number of letters to the editor, after the change to a non-independent. Critical evaluation of the letters (Hypothesis 8) showed no significant change ($X^2(1) = .991, p = .319$), as illustrated in Table 9, which was similar to the overall analysis.

Table 11. Charleston Daily Mail Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials			*
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.661
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	0.433	1	0.510
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.628
	Letters	2.84	1	0.092
Geographic Focus	Editorials	4.739	1	0.029**
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.302

Editorials: N = 30, Columns: N = 26, Letters: N = 58

* No statistics were computed because Origin is a constant; all editorials were staff-written.

** Significant at the .05 level

The Charleston Daily Mail, which was owned by the Clay family and sold to the Thomson chain, shadowed the results of the overall analysis. As shown in Table 11, geographic focus of editorials produced a significant change ($X^2(1) = 4.739, p = .029$). While under the operation of the Clay family, six of the 14, or 42.9%, editorials were focused on local issues, as illustrated in Table 12. After changing to non-independent ownership, that number increased to 81.3%, 13 of 16, which indicates an increase of 117%. As a result, the Charleston Daily Mail decreased the number of editorials focused

on non-local issues by 62.5%, from eight of 14 to three of 16, after moving to Thomson ownership, as indicated in Table 12.

Table 12. Percentages of Editorial Focus by Ownership

		Charleston Daily Mail Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Geographic Focus	Local	42.9%	81.3%
	Non-local	57.1%	18.8%
Total		N = 14	N = 16

Significant at the .05 level, N = 30

The data suggest, then, that the individual analysis falls in line with the overall findings of an increase in editorial page vigor, in terms of geographic focus of editorials (Hypothesis 5), after the paper was purchased by the Thomson chain. Since the sample size of the individual analysis is relatively small (N = 30), a larger sample of the Charleston Daily Mail's editorials should be examined before generalizing this change.

Letters to the editor also produced similar findings as overall analysis. While under independent ownership, the newspaper published 17 letters to the editor. After moving to non-independent ownership, that number climbed to 41; an increase of 141%. Therefore, vigor, in terms of number of letters to the editor (Hypothesis 7), increased as in the overall analysis. As illustrated in Table 11, critical evaluation of the letters (Hypothesis 8), however, produced no significant results ($X^2(1) = 2.84, p = .092$) similar to the overall analysis.

Table 13. Huntington Herald Dispatch Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials			*
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.428
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	0.144	1	0.705
	Columns	0.653	1	0.419
	Letters	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
Geographic Focus	Editorials	3.877	1	.049**
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000

Editorials: N = 28, Columns: N = 64, Letters: N = 11

* No statistics were computed because Origin is a constant; all editorials were staff-written.

** Significant at the .05 level.

The Huntington Herald-Dispatch was similar to the overall findings. As indicated in Table 13, geographic focus of editorials yielded a marginally significant change ($X^2(1) = 3.877, p = .049$). A closer look at the data in Table 14 suggests that editorial vigor, in terms of geographic focus of editorials, increased after the paper was purchased by Gannett. In fact, while under independent ownership, six editorials were focused on local issues as compared to 10 under non-independent ownership; an increase of 67%. Moreover, the number of non-local editorials decreased by 67%, from nine to three, after the newspaper began operating under Gannett. Since the significance level is only marginal ($p = .049$) and the sample size of the individual paper is small ($N = 28$), the results should not be generalized until an expanded analysis, including more editions, is conducted.

Table 14. Percentages of Editorial Focus by Ownership

		Huntington Herald-Dispatch Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Geographic Focus	Local	40%	76.9%
	Non-local	60%	23.1%
Total		N = 15	N = 13

Significant at the .05 level, N = 28

The number of letters to the editor (Hypothesis 7) increased slightly after Gannett's purchase. While the number of letters increased only by one, 20%, it falls in line with the overall analysis' findings, which suggests an increase in vigor. Critical evaluation of letters (Hypothesis 8) produced no marked findings (Fischer's $p = 1.00$), as indicated in Table 13, which falls in line with the overall analysis.

Table 15. (Keyser) Mineral Daily News-Tribune Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
	Letters	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
Geographic Focus	Editorials			*
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000

Editorials: N = 6, Columns: N = 9, Letters: N = 7

* No statistics were computed because Geographic Focus is a constant; all editorials were locally focused.

The Mineral Daily News-Tribune, which was owned by the Tetrick family and purchased by the Liberty Group, overall showed no significant changes in terms of editorial page vigor and ownership situation, as indicated in Table 15. When applied to each of this study's hypotheses, the frequency of item types and categories and the type of ownership situation appear to be independent events.

While operating under the independent ownership of the Tetrick family, the Mineral Daily News-Tribune published three letters to the editor. After moving to the non-independent ownership of the Liberty Group, the paper published four letters, a slight increase which falls in line with the overall findings (rejection of Hypothesis 7). Moreover, critical evaluation of letters (Hypothesis 8) produced no marked findings (Fischer's $p = 1.00$), as indicated in Table 15, which shadows the overall analysis.

The newspaper differed from the overall analysis regarding geographic focus of editorials (Hypothesis 5), however, because no change was detected. In fact, all of the editorials in the study were locally focused, which suggests no change in vigor after the paper moved from independent to non-independent ownership.

Table 16. Logan Banner Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		.001***
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		0.607
	Letters	Fischer's Exact Test		0.250
Geographic Focus	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		0.498
	Columns	Fischer's Exact Test		1.000

Editorials: N = 29, Columns: N = 43, Letters: N = 4

*** Significant at the .001 level

The Logan Banner's individual examination produced different findings than the overall analysis. Critical evaluation and geographic focus of the editorial page items showed insignificant results when compared to the different ownership situations, as illustrated in Table 16. However, origin of editorials produced strongly significant findings (Fischer's $p = .001$). While under the independent ownership of the Frey family, all 12 of the editorials in the sample were written by staff members, as indicated

in Table 17. After changing to non-independent ownership, however, less than half were staff produced. This finding shows a 42% decline in the number of staff-written editorials after the newspaper was sold to a non-independent. Moreover, 10 of the 17 editorials, almost 60%, of the editorials were syndicated. Thus, editorial vigor of the Logan Banner, in terms of authorship of editorials (Hypothesis 1), decreased after the family sold the paper.

Table 17. Percentages of Editorial Authorship by Ownership

		Logan Banner Ownership Situation	
		Family	Chain
Who wrote it	Staff	100%	41.2%
	Syndicated		58.8%
Total		N = 12	N = 17

Significant at the .001 level, N = 29

Number of letters to the editor also differed from the overall analysis. The Logan Banner published three letters while under independent ownership and only one after the change to a non-independent. This finding indicates a decrease in vigor, in terms of number of letters to the editor (acceptance of Hypothesis 7), after the paper moved to non-independent ownership, which is the opposite of the overall analysis. As indicated in Table 16, critical evaluation of the letters, however, produced insignificant results (Fischer's $p = .250$) similar to the overall findings. Since the sample of letters is small, caution should be taken before making generalizations based upon this individual analysis.

Table 18. Raleigh Register Summary Values

Category	Item	X ² Value	df	Significance
Origin	Editorials	Fischer's Exact Test		0.215
	Columns	0.226	1	0.634
Critical Evaluation	Editorials	0.279	1	0.597
	Columns	0.004	1	0.952
	Letters			*
Geographic Focus	Editorials	0.358	1	0.550
	Columns	1.277	1	0.258

Editorials: N = 29, Columns: N = 75, Letters: N = 3

* No statistics were computed because Critical Evaluation is a constant; all letters to the editor were non-critical.

The Raleigh Register, which was owned by the Hodel family and later merged with the neighboring Beckley Post-Herald, overall showed no significant changes in terms of editorial page vigor and ownership situation, as indicated in Table 18. When applied to each of this study's hypotheses, the frequency of item types and categories and the type of ownership situation appear to be independent events.

While operating under the independent ownership of the Hodel family, the Raleigh Register published two letters to the editor. After moving to the non-independent ownership of Clay Communications, the paper published only one letter, a slight decrease. This finding suggests a decrease in vigor, in terms of number of letters (acceptance of Hypothesis 7), after the paper switched to non-independent ownership. However, since the sample size is small (N = 3) not much validation should be applied to the results. The finding differs from the overall analysis of number of letters, which indicated an increase in vigor.

The newspaper differed from the overall analysis regarding geographic focus of editorials (Hypothesis 5). While vigor increased in the total sample in terms of locally

focused editorials, the Raleigh Register exhibited no significant change ($X^2(1) = .358, p = .550$), as indicated in Table 18. This finding suggests no change in vigor in terms of geographic focus of editorials.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Overall, editorial page vigor showed no change as the newspapers under study moved from independent to non-independent ownership. The data rejected nearly all of the hypotheses, which predicted that the newspapers would exhibit more vigor while under family ownership. No significant change was detected in authorship of editorials or columns; critical evaluation of editorials, columns, or letters to the editor; or geographic focus of columns as the newspapers moved from independent to non-independent ownership. Thus, when applied to the research question, the findings suggest no overall change in product quality due to concentration of ownership. However, two hypotheses concerning geographic focus of editorials and number of letters to the editor were rejected because an increase in vigor was detected.

The first significant finding was that of editorial geographic focus. The number of editorials focused on issues affecting the newspapers' local or state community increased by 50%, indicating an increase in vigor as the newspapers moved from independent to non-independent ownership. Simultaneously, the newspapers decreased the number of editorials focused on non-local issues by 23.5%. This finding, then, conflicts with Thrift's research on West Coast dailies, which found that newspapers published fewer aggressive editorials on local matters after the purchase by a chain.¹⁶⁰ The current study's results suggest that the newspapers exhibited a higher commitment to local issues while under non-independent ownership rather than independent ownership as predicted in the hypothesis. An explanation of the finding could be that the non-

¹⁶⁰ Thrift, "How Chain Ownership Affects Editorial Vigor," 329.

independents wanted to demonstrate to their communities that they were concerned with issues in the area, not just national or international news. Since non-independents are sometimes viewed as disregarding local coverage, they may have wanted to ensure their readers that this would not happen once they took over operation of the newspapers.

With the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) June 2003 proposed relaxed limits on media ownership, research signifying its possible effects on news product is vital now more than ever. The decision, if implemented, could raise the national television ownership limit from 35% to 45%.¹⁶¹ This would allow a single company "to own the daily newspaper, several television stations and up to eight radio stations in the same community," according to an article by editorial page editor of The Capital Times, John Nichols.¹⁶² Critics of the proposal fear that it could decrease the amount of local news coverage in these communities. This study, however, suggests otherwise. As mentioned previously, instead of publishing less locally focused editorials under the ownership of a chain, the West Virginia newspapers in this analysis printed significantly more. Although this examination provides only a snapshot of editorial pages in a small state over an almost 35 year time span, it is important because it helps shed more light on one of the most highly debated issues concerning the FCC's proposal. The study also demonstrates a need for further research in how concentration of ownership affects radio and television, as well as newspapers.

¹⁶¹ www.fcc.gov/ownership/, Accessed on April 8, 2004.

¹⁶² John Nichols, "John Nichols: Cronkite Fears the Media Mergers Threaten Democracy," www.madison.com/captimes/opinion/column/nichols/60744.php, Accessed on April 9, 2004.

Another significant finding was in number of letters to the editor. While under non-independent ownership, the newspapers published more letters, not less, as predicted in the hypothesis. This finding suggests that the newspapers were more dedicated to their readers by publishing their opinions after the non-independents took over. Since non-independents are sometimes unfamiliar with the areas in which they are situated, they most likely feel more comfortable publishing letters, whether critical or non-critical, of issues affecting their community. This is perhaps because the readers might have a better awareness of their area's events than the non-independent owners. Independents, on the other hand, may feel they know their communities well enough to report on the issues themselves. Furthermore, the independent owners in this study may have had ties to mainstream individuals within the area and were reluctant to publish certain letters that could have offended them.

A strength of the study is the comparative analysis over two time periods of ownership as in Thrift's research. Examining editorial pages while under independent ownership and then comparing them to editorial pages under non-independent operation provides a better picture of the changes in vigor, if any, than examining the chain pages alone. Future studies should include a control group of a few West Virginia dailies that has remained independent. This addition will be useful for comparison purposes and should increase the significance of the study's findings.

Another strength of the study was the inclusion of columns. As previously mentioned, this is the first known study to incorporate editorial page columns in addition to editorials and letters to the editor. While findings on columns yielded mostly insignificant results in this study, they indicate a need for future research with a much

larger sample. Columns are important to include in editorial page vigor studies because oftentimes the issues and the opinions of the columnists have the ability to affect readers' views.

Another suggestion for future research would be to include editorial cartoons in addition to the other editorial page items in the study. As with columns, the cartoons depict images of opinion that could portray the newspapers' views. This inclusion will help provide an even broader understanding of editorial page vigor under both ownership situations.

One weakness of the study was the sample size of each editorial page item. Future research should either expand the study to include 1) more West Virginia newspapers that changed from non-independent ownership, 2) newspapers from similar areas of the United States, and/or 3) a four-week constructed sample: two weeks before the change of ownership and two weeks after. Including any of the above suggestions should only increase the significance of the present findings regarding geographic focus of editorials and number of letters to the editor. Additionally, expanding the sample size could possibly produce significant results in the other areas discussed in the hypotheses as well.

An additional issue in the study worth mentioning deals with the Charleston Daily Mail, which is a part of the state's only JOA. The newspaper partners with the state's largest newspaper in terms of circulation, the family-owned Charleston Gazette. While the Charleston Daily Mail followed the same trends as the overall study, the effects of media ownership on editorial vigor of JOA newspapers cannot be determined since its partner paper was not examined. A separate future research project should examine this

unique situation within West Virginia and compare it to JOA newspapers of similar ownership situations, one chain-owned and one family-owned, in other regions.

More research is needed on media concentration of ownership's effects on editorial page vigor so broader generalizations can be made. The inclusion of columns as an editorial page item will only strengthen any case involving vigor. Only then can it be determined if media concentration of ownership has had a detrimental effect on the heart of daily newspapers: the editorial page.

Appendix I: Newspaper and sampling information

Following is information regarding sell dates, leeway periods, sample periods, sample dates, and ownership information of the West Virginia dailies included in this study. The leeway periods are six months before the change in ownership and six months after the change of ownership: a one-year period total. The leeway period before the change of ownership is the 182 days prior to, and not including, the sell date. The leeway period after the change of ownership is 182 days after, and including, the sell date. The sample periods are 183 days prior to the beginning of the leeway period and 183 days after the end of the one-year leeway period. The sample dates were chosen using a constructed week sampling method, which was explained in the methods section.

Beckley Post-Herald

Independent owner: The Hodel family

Sell date: July 1, 1976

Non-independent owner: Clay Communications, Inc.

Leeway period before: January 1, 1976 to June 30, 1976

Leeway period after: July 1, 1976 to December 29, 1976

Sample period before: July 2, 1975 to December 31, 1975

Sample period after: December 30, 1976 to June 30, 1977

Sample dates independent: Monday, August 4, 1975; Tuesday, December 9, 1975; Wednesday, August 6, 1975; Thursday, July 3, 1975; Friday, October 10, 1975; Saturday, October 4, 1975; Sunday, December 7, 1975

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, May 30, 1977; Tuesday, June 7, 1977; Wednesday, April 27, 1977; Thursday, February 10, 1977; Friday, June 10, 1977; Saturday, April 9, 1977; Sunday, May 1, 1977

Notes: The Beckley Post-Herald collaborated with the Raleigh Register for the Saturday and Sunday editions under both independent and non-independent ownership. The paper also collaborated with the Raleigh Register for Memorial Day on the Monday under non-independent ownership. The data for these dates were used for both the Beckley Post-Herald and the Raleigh Register. The two papers later merged to form the Beckley Register-Herald, which is still in existence today.

Bluefield Daily Telegraph

Independent owner: The Shott family

Sell date: January 1, 1985

Non-independent owner: Worrell Newspapers, Inc.

Leeway period before: July 3, 1984 to December 31, 1984

Leeway period after: January 1, 1985 to July 1, 1985

Sample period before: January 2, 1984 to July 2, 1984

Sample period after: July 2, 1985 to December 31, 1985

Sample dates independent: Monday, June 18, 1984; Tuesday, February 14, 1984; Wednesday, January 4, 1984; Thursday, March 22, 1984; Friday, March 30, 1984; Saturday, June 16, 1984; Sunday, May 27, 1984

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, October 28, 1985; Tuesday, December 31, 1985; Wednesday, October 9, 1985; Thursday, October 24, 1985; Friday, October 11, 1985; Saturday, November 2, 1985; Sunday, October 13, 1985

Notes: None

Charleston Daily Mail

Independent owner: The Clay family

Sell date: April 16, 1987

Non-independent owner: Thomson Newspapers

Leeway period before: October 16, 1986 to April 15, 1987

Leeway period after: April 16, 1987 to October 14, 1987

Sample period before: April 16, 1986 to October 15, 1986

Sample period after: October 15, 1987 to April 14, 1988

Sample dates independent: Monday, June 9, 1986; Tuesday, May 27, 1986; Wednesday, September 24, 1986; Thursday, September 4, 1986; Friday, May 30, 1986; Saturday, October 11, 1986

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, December 21, 1987; Tuesday, March 15, 1988; Wednesday, February 24, 1988; Thursday, February 18, 1988; Friday, March 25, 1988; Saturday, January 30, 1988

Notes: The Charleston Gazette, a family owned paper, and the Charleston Daily Mail formed a JOA in 1957.¹⁶³ The jointly owned agency, Charleston Newspapers, is run by an independent president and general manager, who reports to a management committee comprising two representatives from each paper.¹⁶⁴ The two newspapers collaborate on the Sunday edition called the Gazette-Mail. Since the Gazette contributes the editorial material for this edition, the Daily Mail was not coded for Sundays in this study.

Huntington Herald-Dispatch

Independent owner: The Long family

Sell date: November 1, 1971

Non-independent owner: Gannett

Leeway period before: May 3, 1971 to October 31, 1971

Leeway period after: November 1, 1971 to April 30, 1972

Sample period before: November 1, 1970 to May 2, 1971

Sample period after: May 1, 1972 to October 30, 1972

Sample dates independent: Monday, December 7, 1970; Tuesday, April 27, 1971; Wednesday, April 14, 1971; Thursday, December 24, 1970; Friday, January 15, 1971; Saturday, November 14, 1970; Sunday, April 25, 1971

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, October 16, 1972; Tuesday, May 23, 1972; Wednesday, May 24, 1972; Thursday, June 1, 1972; Friday, May 19, 1972; Saturday, June 10, 1972; Sunday, September 24, 1972

Notes: The Huntington Publishing Company was purchased by the Honolulu Star Bulletin, a non-independent, on January 25, 1971. However, since the Star Bulletin owned the paper for less than one year, the leeway periods and sample were taken from the Gannett purchase date. The newspaper was still under Gannett ownership at the time of this study. The Huntington Herald-Dispatch collaborated with the now dissolved (Huntington) Advertiser on Saturday and Sunday editions, which were coded for the study.

¹⁶³ “12 Cities Still Have JOAs: Court-approved Joint Operating Agreements Down from Over 25.” http://seattlepi.nwsource.com/business/119679_joal elsewhere29.html, Accessed on March 30, 2004.

¹⁶⁴ Steve Fidel, “Singleton, MediaNews Group are No Strangers to the JOA Environment.” <http://deseretnews.com/dn/view/0,1249,230013835,00.html>, Accessed on March 30, 2004.

(Keyser) Mineral Daily News-Tribune

Independent owner: The Tetrick family

Sell date: December 9, 1998

Non-independent owner: Liberty Group Publishing

Leeway period before: June 10, 1998 to December 8, 1998

Leeway period after: December 9, 1998 to June 8, 1999

Sample period before: December 9, 1997 to June 9, 1998

Sample period after: June 9, 1999 to December 8, 1999

Sample dates independent: Wednesday, January 21, 1998; Saturday, March 21, 1998

Sample dates independent that were pulled but had no editorial page: Monday, April 20, 1998; Tuesday, March 24, 1998; Thursday, May 21, 1998; Friday, December 12, 1997

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, August 23, 1999; Wednesday, June 23, 1999; Saturday, November 6, 1999

Sample dates non-independent that were pulled but had no editorial page: Tuesday, August 3, 1999; Thursday, October 28, 1999; Friday, June 25, 1999

Notes: The Mineral News-Tribune collaborated with the Mountain Echo, a weekly paper, for the Saturday edition. The newspaper did not publish a Sunday edition.

Logan Banner

Independent owner: The Frey family

Sell date: October 1, 1965

Non-independent owner: Group publisher, Tutt Bradford, out of Maryville, TN

Leeway period before: April 2, 1965 to September 30, 1965

Leeway period after: October 1, 1965 to March 31, 1966

Sample period before: October 1, 1964 to April 1, 1965

Sample period after: April 1, 1966 to September 30, 1966

Sample dates independent: Monday, November 23, 1964; Tuesday, October 27, 1964; Wednesday, February 17, 1965; Thursday, December 24, 1964; Friday, October 9, 1964; Saturday, February 13, 1965

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, April 18, 1966; Tuesday, August 23, 1966; Wednesday, September 21, 1966; Thursday, August 4, 1966; Friday, April 8, 1966; Saturday, May 21, 1966

Notes: The newspaper did not publish a Sunday edition at the time of this study.

Raleigh Register

Independent owner: The Hodel family

Sell date: July 1, 1976

Non-independent owner: Clay Communications, Inc.

Leeway period before: January 1, 1976 to June 30, 1976

Leeway period after: July 1, 1976 to December 29, 1976

Sample period before: July 2, 1975 to December 31, 1975

Sample period after: December 30, 1976 to June 30, 1977

Sample dates independent: Monday, July 21, 1975; Tuesday, September 16, 1975; Wednesday, October 29, 1975; Thursday, November 6, 1975; Friday, October 10, 1975; Saturday, October 4, 1975; Sunday, December 7, 1975

Sample dates non-independent: Monday, May 30, 1977; Tuesday, January 11, 1977; Wednesday, March 23, 1977; Thursday, February 10, 1977; Friday, April 22, 1977; Saturday, April 9, 1977; Sunday, May 1, 1977

Notes: The Raleigh Register collaborated with the Beckley Post-Herald for the Saturday and Sunday editions under both independent and non-independent ownership. The paper also collaborated with the Beckley Post-Herald for Memorial Day on the Monday under non-independent ownership. The data for these dates were used for both the Raleigh Register and the Beckley Post-Herald. The Raleigh Register is no longer a sole publication. Since a portion of the paper is still in existence today as a part of the Beckley Register-Herald, it was included in the study.

Appendix II: Newspaper item citations

Beckley Post-Herald

Independent

Note: Saturday, October 4, 1975 and Sunday, December 7, 1975 are also cited under Raleigh Register since they collaborated on these dates.

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“Is He Off the Dime?” (*Beckley Post-Herald and (Raleigh) Register*, 7 December 1975, 6.

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“Lack of Natural Gas Could be a Hoax.” *Beckley Post-Herald*, 10 October 1975, 4.

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- _____. "Nixon Not Involved with Wounded Knee." (*Beckley*) *Post-Herald and (Raleigh) Register*, 4 October 1975, 6.
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- _____. "Yesterday and Today: Manson Left a String of Crimes Behind." (*Beckley*) *Post-Herald and (Raleigh) Register*, 4 October 1975, 6.
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- _____. "Top O' the Morning: Sarandon Praised for Film Role." *(Beckley) Post-Herald and (Raleigh) Register*, 4 October 1975, 6.
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