Abstract: Covering state and federal campaigns in an age of dwindling resources: An analysis of three state capital newspapers during the 2012 races

The professional trade papers lament a decline in professional journalists at statehouse newspapers throughout the country. How does this decline affect newsroom practices, and can it be seen in the way the democratic decision-making process takes place? This content analysis of three state capital newspapers’ (The Denver Post, The Kennebec Journal and the Madison Capital Times) coverage of the 2012 legislative elections, both to state legislatures and the U.S. Congress, provides a snapshot of how state capital newspapers are coping with dwindling numbers and the relative quality of their coverage across the two campaigns. The research found that, rather than relying on the fewer statehouse reporters remaining, the newspapers tended to take a pragmatic, “all hands on deck” approach to covering elections at both the federal and state level, pulling in resources from throughout the newsroom. However, the game frame was more prevalent in the coverage of federal elections than state elections, and reporters sought sources outside the political process more often in federal elections than state elections.

This research builds upon the volume of literature examining horse race coverage of politics but suggests the “cycle of cynicism” that builds from such framing could be exaggerated at the federal level thanks to the discrepancy in framing. It also suggests the doom and gloom of statehouse reporting on the decline could be inaccurate when it comes to election coverage, which draws the greatest number of eyeballs.