

FILLING THE STATEHOUSE VOID:
THE IDEOLOGY OF ONLINE NON-PROFIT NEWS SITES

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled

FILLING THE STATEHOUSE VOID:
THE IDEOLOGY OF ONLINE NON-PROFIT NEWS SITES

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a candidate for the degree of master of arts,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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For Stephanie,
my wife, best friend, and fellow adventurer.

For my mom and dad,
to whom I owe my passion for learning.

Thank you.

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ABSTRACT

The number of traditional news reporters present in state capitols is decreasing across the United States. Non-traditional online news organizations are attempting to fill that void. These entities, many of them non-profit news sites, focus their coverage on state government matters, sometimes contributing that content to the mainstream. Many critiques emerging from the mainstream and other news sources question the neutrality of these organizations, but little academic research exploring this content exists.

Using a qualitative textual analysis, this study explored the ideological nature of the statehouse government coverage disseminated by online non-profit news sites in Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Texas. It then compared that content to coverage provided by the traditional press, represented in this study by the states' Associated Press bureaus. The study used Van Dijk's (1998a; 1998b) description of ideology and Tuchman's (1972) dissection of objectivity as theoretical lenses to guide the analysis.

The results suggest that online non-profit news sites tend to share an informal tone, a suspicion of government, and an emphasis on viewpoint over more substantial fact-based evidence. Politically speaking, the ideologies of these sites do often land somewhere left or right of center on the political spectrum. However, the results do not necessarily suggest that the statehouse coverage provided by online non-profit content is any more or less ideological than the same content disseminated by the traditional press.

Chapter 1: Introduction

As legacy media struggle through financial crises and reporting staff cutbacks, the manner in which traditional news beats are covered is in transition. This is proving particularly true at the state level. The number of traditional journalists walking the statehouse government beat is in decline (Dorroh, 2009; Gibbons, 2012; Gurwitt, 2009; Smith, 2009). A study conducted by the American Journalism Review found that from 2006 to 2009, the number of mainstream newspaper journalists covering state government news dropped by more than 30 percent (Dorroh, 2009). One magazine referred to the phenomenon as a “disappearing act” (Smith, 2009).

Yet as the traditional journalist’s presence continues to diminish, online non-profit news organizations are attempting to fill the void. In some cases, mainstream news outlets have published content produced by these non-profit sites (Craver, 2012; Fink, 2009; Miller, 2010). The *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald*, a small-market newspaper in Iowa, appears to lean heavily on non-profit reports because the content is provided for free (B. Cooper, 2012). While the coverage might give citizens information to enhance their knowledge as participants in a democracy, some have questioned the ideological neutrality of these news sites (Craver, 2012; Gibbons, 2012; Harki & Knezevich, 2010; Holcomb et al., 2011).

So, what is the nature of the state government coverage provided by these sites? How does the content they produce compare ideologically to the news content that is created by its mainstream counterparts? This study will utilize existing research and a qualitative textual analysis to explore these questions. The focus of this study is placed

specifically on state government, an under-investigated and important component of American democracy. Statehouse lawmaking arguably hits closer to home than legislation coming out of Washington, D. C. (Smith, 2009). As one writer editorialized, “Health care, education, business regulation — just name it and chances are that state regulations and policies have a lot more impact than what happens on the federal level” (Gibbons, 2012). Notions such as these might escalate concern over a developing statehouse coverage void.

The attempt by online non-profit news sites to fill this void or to compensate for the deficiencies of the mainstream press is sometimes hinted at in their mission statements and organizational descriptions. Watchdog.org, for example, is a collection of 20 online news sites dedicated to covering the political news of 21 states. The group claims to abstain from imparting a partisan interest, instead describing its mission as “doing what legacy journalism outlets prove unable to do: **share** information, dive deep into **investigations**, and **provide the fourth estate** [original emphasis] that has begun to fade in recent decades” (“About Watchdog,” n. d.). Watchdog.org was organized in 2009 and is supported by the Franklin Center for Government & Public Integrity (“About Watchdog,” n. d.). In an op-ed piece posted on the Watchdog.org site, Franklin Center president Jason Stverak (2013) wrote:

The mainstream press has become a shell of its former self, and nonprofit news organizations stay afloat by filling the void that was left when legacy media put short-term rating over providing substance for their audience. ... Statehouse coverage was once the bread and butter of many newspapers around the country.

Reporting was often repetitive and rarely sexy, but none the less [*sic*], it was the foundation of a healthy news diet. (paras. 4-5)

Critics, meanwhile, suggest that many non-profit sites harbor a slanted political ideology. In one op-ed piece, Gene Gibbons (2012), a veteran journalist and a former national political writer who covered news for United Press International and Reuters, wrote: “For the most part, the people in charge of these would-be watchdog operations are political hacks out to subvert journalism in their quest to grab and keep power using whatever means they have to do so” (p. 24). Gibbons (2012) was particularly critical of the Watchdog.org group, accusing its Franklin Center creators of rubbing shoulders with conservative organizations. It should be noted that with the help of the Pew Charitable Trusts, Gibbons (2012) founded Stateline.org, a state-government focused news website.

Gibbons (2012) is not the only mainstream journalist to assert the claim of non-profit bias (see also Craver, 2012; Harki & Knezevich, 2010). A common concern among these critics, and also among researchers (see Holcomb et al., 2011), is that non-profit IRS claims fail to provide more detailed information on the specific funding parties of these sites, and therefore the specific funders are often unknown.

However, two other online non-profit news sites, the Texas Tribune and MinnPost, are relatively transparent about their funding (Holcomb et al., 2011) and also seem to escape fierce criticism from mainstream media entities. In fact, the Texas Tribune has partnered with the *New York Times* and KUT News in Austin, Texas, to expand its reach (“About Texas Tribune,” n. d.). The non-profit site, which launched in 2009, describes itself as non-partisan and says its vision is to “serve the journalism community as a source of innovation and to build the next great public media brand in the

United States” (“About Texas Tribune,” n. d., para. 1). MinnPost, meanwhile, says it is comprised of “professional journalists, most of whom have decades of experience in the Twin Cities media” (“About MinnPost,” n. d., para. 2). MinnPost also specifically states that it will not endorse political candidates.

Yet, both MinnPost and the Texas Tribune have their critics, primarily emerging from the online blogging realm. MinnPost, launched in 2007, has been accused of being funded by “rich liberals” and attacked for its coverage of conservative politicians (Hinderaker, 2011). The Texas Tribune has been called a “liberal-biased organization” with a “house-full of liberal journalists” (R. Cooper, 2009).

Several state capitol press corps have denied online non-profit news sites access to statehouse credentials based on bylaws that require media operations to be devoid of lobbying efforts (Miller, 2010). However, the identities of these online non-profit news organizations are still relatively unknown and their content understudied. This research aims to describe and interpret the ideology of the content that these sites, and sites like them, are injecting into cyberspace and potentially into the mainstream information pipeline as they attempt to fill the statehouse news void.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Media Ideology

In this study, the description of the content produced by online non-profit news organizations will be viewed through the lens of ideology. The theoretical origin of ideology is often credited to Marxism, although Mannheim (1936) suggested it could be traced back even further than that. Williams (1976) attributed the modern meaning of the word to Napoleon Bonaparte.

Ideology has been mused upon for ages, and ideology within the press also has been researched and discussed in abundance (see C. A. Cooper & Johnson, 2009; Gans, 1979; Kieran, 1997; Schudson, 2003; Stone, 2011; Tuchman, 1978). Ideology is abstract and often divisive among scholars (Van Dijk, 1998a), leading to different theories and assessments. For instance, in his discussion of ideology, Hartley (1982) suggested that the news media in general are ideological, calling news values — essentially the media's selection of content and portrayal of events (Gans, 1979) — an ideological code. “[I]t seems an individual journalist, whether male or female, is unable to escape their institutionalized force (presented as the *right* [original emphasis] way of doing journalism), even when s/he contests their ideology” (p. 81). The “right way” likely pertains to the prevailing value of objectivity, which Gans (1979) said is an ideology in itself. Hartley (1982) additionally brought the receiver into the equation, suggesting that the audience plays a role in the interpretation of a message and therefore attaches an ideology to it. In a similar argument, Vallone, Ross, and Lepper (1985) suggested that

audience members tend readily to accept news content in line with their already-held biases but reject content that disagrees with them (see also Stone, 2011).

Indeed, ideology has some properties of an echo chamber. Is the transmitter infusing the message with his or her ideology? Is the transmitter crafting a story with the ideology of the audience in mind (see C. A. Cooper & Johnson, 2009)? Do ideological meanings manifest in the audience's interpretation of the message? Psychologically, it is probably all of the above (Stone, 2011). What is known is that more than half of news consumers believe the ideology of a message originates in the press. Pew Research Center (2011) reported that 62% of news consumers believe news reporting is politically biased, and 72% believe reports tend to favor one side of an issue over another.

Kieran (1997), however, made an effort to dispel the notion that the news media must be perceived as necessarily ideological. Kieran (1997) calls such a belief “the ideological presumption” (p. 79). This presumption, he said, undermines the rationality of a receiver to judge the merits of the information contained in a particular news report. “It is important to realize the significance of the claim that the news media are inherently ideological. If true, it is impossible, as a matter of principle, for journalists and the news media to be untainted by ideology” (p. 80). He added that if this were the case, objectivity and sound journalism would merely be a “mask” over media ideology. He noted that the most common target of ideological analysis — the exploration of objectivity and press bias — is misplaced. He called for the focus to be placed instead on assessing the overall normative role and ethical practices of the press. “After all, if we did think all news was ideological, then Lenin's, Hitler's, or Big Brother's news cannot be any more distorted, in principle at least, than anyone else's” (Kieran, 1997, p. 93).

Indeed, in principle, this is probably true. Certainly, the news media differ from Lenin, Hitler, and Big Brother because they generally follow an ethical code as they attend to a normative duty of informing the public. For instance, the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics calls for a journalist to “seek truth and report it” and to “minimize harm” (“SPJ Code,” 1996). Kieran (1997) would likely also agree that ethics are only as good as the human being who wields them. His argument is noble, essentially stating that the press should be allowed to be human in its pursuit of promoting democracy. The goal, he implied, should not be to assess the ideology of the news media but to evaluate the news media’s ethics and normative role. This argument, however, attempts to separate ideology from ethics. I would contend this to be akin to separating the soul from the individual. One cannot function without the other. An ethical choice is based on ideological decision-making and a socially constructed value set of the press.

Furthermore, presuming the news media (and all discourse, for that matter) to be intrinsically ideological is not necessarily to question the *information* provided but rather to consider the manner in which it is delivered. The presumption hardly suggests that ideology must always be as manipulative as the rhetoric of a dictator. In many circumstances, it might be rather innocuous — call it an “ideological glaze” that comes with channeling a message through human brains. Journalists make news judgments when they choose the lead story or select what they believe to be the most important facts of an event. This is a series of ideological decisions (Van Dijk, 1998a). Indeed, *facts* need not be ideological, but I would hold that *news* is something different. News is the bone of fact surrounded by the flesh of judgments made by a group of individuals within an

organization working toward a common goal: to inform, to entertain, and, perhaps, to persuade. These elements originate in what Van Dijk (1998a) calls “context” (p. 211). Adding to it the notion that objectivity is a complex ideology in itself, it is clear that no message is completely digested when simply taken at face value. A fact sent through the imperfection of human channels should not be expected to exit with a pure, pristine sheen. News is imperfect, and for the purpose of this study, it unavoidably contains the ideologies of its transmitters.

Van Dijk’s (1998a) theory of ideology corroborates this view, as does Tuchman’s (1972) dissection of the traditional objectivity that many news outlets espouse to this day. These concepts will serve as the theoretical framework of this study.

Van Dijk (1998a) devised his theory by building from a classic yet dynamic definition of ideology provided by Mannheim (1936), who broke ideology into two separate concepts: the *particular conception* and the *total conception*. These conceptions exist on different levels, but share one key quality: Messages delivered through either conception should not be taken at face value (Mannheim, 1936). The *particular conception* of ideology exists at the individual level, and only a particular part of a message is considered ideological (Mannheim, 1936). Often, this is a statement made with a conscious or half-conscious motivation to disguise, conceal, or deceive (Mannheim, 1936). The *total conception* of ideology, which Mannheim (1936) defined as “the ideology of an age or of a concrete historico-social group” (p. 56), takes into account the broader “worldview” — or the framework, history, and social construction of a collection of people. It has no motivation; it is simply a product of place, time, and existing societal principles (Mannheim, 1936).

Van Dijk (1998a) took these conceptions and molded them. Like Mannheim (1936), Van Dijk (1998a) presented two conceptually different components, but he tethered them. He started with *cognition*, the psychological, mental level of an individual, and tied it to *society*, which provides the social constructs that also make a person who he or she is (Van Dijk, 1998a). Neither concept can function alone (Van Dijk, 1998a). Overall, he defined ideology as “the basis of the social representations shared by members of a group” (Van Dijk, 1998a, p. 6). He reined in the “worldview” concept to create a more ground-level basis of belief. Put simply, Van Dijk (1998a) said ideologies are shared social constructs.

Van Dijk (1998a) set out to make ideology more tangible. He believes ideology manifests in discourse, including news delivered by the media. Of the media, Van Dijk (1998a) said:

Much research suggests that the general, ideological influence of the media is pervasive, especially in those domains where media users have no alternative ideological sources or personal experiences that are blatantly inconsistent with the dominant ideologies as conveyed and reproduced by the mass media. (p. 181)

Van Dijk (1998a) added that the elites of society typically have the greatest access to the media and that this ideology is reflected in news messages. This assertion is in line with the complaints made by some online non-profit news sites. How, though, does the content of online non-profit news sites differ than that of the mainstream media?

Before beginning to analyze this, it will be useful to outline a common ideological practice of the mainstream press, that of objectivity. Objectivity has superficially been described in terms of neutrality or impartiality (Tuchman, 1978), although the concept

has several layers. Objectivity was borne out of the demise of yellow journalism and the partisan press (Schudson, 1978). News outlets realized they could reach a broader audience and turn a greater profit if news were portrayed in a more straightforward, un-slanted manner (Schudson, 1978). The reliance on official sources followed, allowing governmental bodies and political figures to essentially control their own public image through the process of what Schudson (1978) called “news management.” Deceit on the heels of Vietnam and Watergate led to a cultural shift in the people’s trust of government and in turn a media transition away from simple political parroting to a more muckraking and literary style (Schudson, 1978). The progress and popularity of television also helped usher in a new, more interpretive style of journalism as media genres competed for their share of the news consumer market (Schudson, 1978).

While today perhaps less trusting of the government, news outlets still practice and preach a form of objectivity. In many ways, objectivity is a value set — a manual of how “best” to cover an event. Kennedy and Cameron (2007) called objectivity a “method,” and “at the heart of that method were independence, reliance on factual evidence, and openness about method and results” (p. 13). Helping to further the case of objectivity as an ideology, Kennedy and Cameron (2007) compiled a demographic of American journalists, primarily comprised of middle-class, middle age, and “politically middle of the road” individuals (p. 13). In turn, these individuals, as members of a society, might embrace a certain value set. Kennedy and Cameron (2007) called this a “built-in bias” (p. 13) and rationalized that this demographic, coupled with the dominant ideology of journalism on a macro scale — to give voice to the voiceless and expose

unscrupulous enterprises of the elite and the powerful — lent itself to a media role “much more likely, in America, to be identified as ‘liberal’ rather than ‘conservative’” (p. 14).

Ideological leanings, however, are not often embraced by mainstream media entities. Instead, journalists continue to aim to satisfy the guidelines of traditional objectivity, an action Tuchman (1972) called a “strategic ritual” (p. 661). She said the components of objectivity emerge in the form and content of news stories and within the relationships between members of media organizations. To achieve objectivity, Tuchman (1972) said journalists practice the (a) “presentation of conflicting possibilities,” (b) “presentation of supporting evidence,” (c) “the judicious use of quotation marks,” and (d) “structuring [of] information in an appropriate sequence” (pp. 665-669). Essentially, journalists attempt to tell both sides of the story by gathering differing viewpoints, especially when presenting a “fact” that cannot be verified. When a fact can be verified, they present the evidence to support it. The use of direct quotes keeps claims and value judgments in the words of the speaker, which Tuchman (1972) said is an attempt by the media outlet to absolve itself from accusations that it is presenting its biased opinion. The structure comes into play in the final packaging and headlining of a story, and in the ordering of facts and story elements. “Material facts,” Tuchman (1972) said, tend to appear in the opening paragraphs of the story in “objective” reports, such as in the popular inverted pyramid style of news writing (p. 670).

This is not to say the practice of objectivity truly yields objective reports. As Schudson (1978) noted, this practice tends to lead to the reliance upon “official” sources for information. Tuchman (1972) said critics of objectivity suggest the method of telling both sides of the story does not necessarily yield objectivity as an “object of thought” (p.

667), and that supporting a fact with evidence does not necessarily preclude the entrance of opinion into a news story. Indeed, ideology can lie within the choice and presentation of facts (Van Dijk, 1998b). That said, the *attempted* practice of what newsrooms deem to be the method of objectivity is still alive (Kennedy & Cameron, 2007).

To determine these ideological properties and others contained within discourse, Van Dijk (1998b) proposed a series of concepts to be considered during analysis. During the textual analysis and data analysis stages, this study will utilize seven of these concepts: polarization, coherence, presuppositions and implications, structure, description, attribution, and context (Van Dijk, 1998b).

Polarization is a concept intrinsic to ideology and often bleeds into other concepts when viewed through what Van Dijk (1998b) and others call the “ideological square.” It pits “Us” versus “Them” in the presentation of a message through the playing up of “our” good actions and “their” bad actions, and the playing down of “our” bad actions and “their” good actions (Van Dijk, 1998b, p. 33).

Coherence deals in the connection and relationships of facts, the “propositions” in a piece of discourse that lead to a coherent understanding across groups (Van Dijk, 1998b). It helps paint the ideological portrait of the group by organizing the discourse into a thematic model (Van Dijk, 1998b) or a representation of the ideology being transmitted. It examines how the sentences fit together at the micro, “local” level, and also examines the discourse at the macro, “global” level, taking into consideration the topics and themes that emerge from the discourse (Van Dijk, 1998b).

Presuppositions and implications in discourse work hand in hand. Presuppositions are items in a piece of text that might be presented in a way that implies a fact is assumed

to be true, a “given” of sorts (Van Dijk, 1998b). The use of a presupposition that lacks depth might be used as a strategy to progress an ideology within a text (Van Dijk, 1998b). Implications work similarly, but deal with “implied” or unsaid opinions or value judgments (Van Dijk, 1998b). Indeed, what is unsaid in a piece of discourse might speak as loudly as what is explicitly stated.

The structure or form of a piece of discourse is often rich in ideological elements. Structure, for the purpose of this study, will include the word choices in a text, the physical structure of sentences, the order of facts, and the overall packaging of a story, including headlines, writing style, and tone (Van Dijk, 1998b). It will also include a “semantic move” that Van Dijk (1998b) calls a “disclaimer,” in which the author attempts to soften an ideology by offering a qualifying statement ahead of a rebuttal, such as in Van Dijk’s (1998b) example, “I’m not a racist, but...” (p. 39).

Description can be used to emphasize the positive actions of an ingroup over the actions of an outgroup through depth and detail (Van Dijk, 1998b). More time might be spent outlining the positives of the ingroup, while neglecting to completely develop the description of outgroup achievements, or by spending more time concentrating on the negative actions of an outgroup (Van Dijk, 1998b).

Attribution might deal in the attribution of blame for a particular shortcoming (Van Dijk, 1998b), and in this study, it will also be useful to consider the attribution of information to sources — examining who is quoted directly in a story and analyzing which sources seem to be controlling the information flow. An analysis of how the sources come off looking in the end might be helpful in an ideological analysis.

Finally, Van Dijk (1998a) defined the complex concept of context as, “[T]he structured set of all properties of a social situation that are possibly relevant for the production, structures, interpretation and functions of text and talk” (p. 211). It is comprised of several dimensions that serve as a framework, a window through which to view a piece of discourse. Van Dijk (1998a) cautioned that a context model must be treated dynamically and allowed to change with the ongoing discourse. In all, Van Dijk (1998a) named 16 dimensions that typically comprise the context of a piece of discourse. Each of these dimensions may come with an ideological influence. Van Dijk’s (1998a) dimensions are summarized here, translated into journalistic terms where feasible:

- *Domain*: An upper-level dimension that broadly encapsulates the identity and activities of members in a societal group, such as a journalist toiling in the news media.
- *Overall interaction and type of speech event*: A genre of discourse, such as a speech, a photo, or an article. In this study, it might be a feature, an investigative report, a hard news story, etc. This discernment will help set the context for the text being analyzed as each have different ideological properties.

- *Functions*: The social purpose of a journalist's actions, such as serving as a government watchdog.
- *Intention*: A mentally determined action, or in ideological terms, the stating or concealing of true intentions.¹ It is here that omissions in a report may lead to ideological assessments.
- *Purpose*: A mental-level dimension that focuses on the goals of a particular action, differing from intention in that it works in concert with the writer's social-level *function*. Van Dijk (1998a) said this distinction is crucial. "It allows us to assign different social functions to discourse accomplished with the same 'purpose in mind', to account for 'unintended' social consequences of intentions and purposes ... and so on" (Van Dijk, 1998a, p. 218).
- *Date, time*: The date a story is written and the point in time it is published. This might be relevant in comparisons between media entities. There might be ideological considerations, for instance, if one entity covers a story on a high-traffic weekday and a second entity runs a similar story on a weekend.
- *Location*: Taking into account where a reporter went to gather data and perhaps where the story was written. It might speak to ideological decision-making if a

¹ Van Dijk (1998a) acknowledged that some scholars contend the analysis of "intention" cannot be assessed from discourse alone on the basis that intentions are "personal and private" (p. 217). Van Dijk (1998a) disagrees, believing that people regularly assess the intentions of a writer even when the intentions are not made explicit in the writer's outputs. These assessments, he said, might be based on previous experiences with the disseminator or on personal experiences. Furthermore, he said, intention is important to consider for it is here that omissions in a piece of discourse might lead to an ideological assessment.

writer chooses to cover a political pseudo-event in one location as opposed to covering a story in the state capitol that day.

- *Circumstances*: A consideration for situations of time, place, and other circumstantial factors. In this case, a story might be contingent upon another event taking place. For instance, stories concerning the introduction of a bill take place early in a legislative session and may contain less refined arguments than a bill heading for a Senate vote.
- *Props and relevant objects*: Tangible artifacts described in a story. These might come attached with symbolism, such as the description of a person's attire. For example, a description of a uniformed or well-dressed individual might imply power and respect versus a description of someone wearing tattered jeans and a T-shirt.
- *Participant role*: The role from which the speaker transmits his or her message. In this study, participants primarily will be delivering their messages as writers.
- *Professional role*: The job title and description of the speaker. This study will deal mostly with journalists, though some will come from the mainstream and others from non-profit news entities.
- *Social role*: The position of the message disseminator in society. This might include the stance a reporter takes on an issue, perhaps an indicator of a socially influenced ideology.
- *Affiliation*: The organization or institution with which a disseminator associates. In this dimension, a news organization's values and ideals might influence a writer to act a certain way. These organizational values will be described in the

organization's mission statements and codes, but other values might not be stated explicitly.

- *Membership*: Other associations with social groups. In addition to professional affiliation, a reporter may have other societal belongings.
- *The social others*: Typical referents of a news report. Who or what groups are typically discussed in the text? If one group is targeted more than another, it may speak to ideology.
- *Social representations*: The knowledge that a writer carries with him or her.

These are the social constructs that have shaped the reporter in his or her society.

The concepts presented here will be considered during the methodological coding process. Tuchman's (1972) components of objectivity, it should be noted, fit neatly into the concepts presented by Van Dijk (1998b) and may be discussed by the degree in which a piece of text seems to favor one side or another.

In a society where the expectation of the press is to strive for this objectivity, the ideology of an emerging media genre such as online non-profit sites is worth studying to see how the content differs ideologically from what already exists in the mainstream.

Online News

However, this study aims not to question or disparage the content of these sites but rather to describe and interpret it. Considering the pervasiveness of which media ideology enters a society (Van Dijk, 1998a), providing insight into the ideological makeup of alternative news organizations may empower news consumers to make informed news selections.

Online news is quite easily the most increasingly popular form of media. In 2012, Pew Research Center reported a more than 17% increase in online news readership from 2010 to 2011, which puts it 13% ahead of network television viewing, the second most viewed news genre (Mitchell & Rosenstiel, 2012). The birth of online media content often is associated with the slow demise of newspapers. Some contend that online news has sapped advertising revenue from for-profit traditional media streams (Fenton, 2011).

Deuze (2008) somewhat laments the frequent comparison of online news to traditional media forms. In defining online news, Deuze (2008) drew on three distinct characteristics: “multimediality,” “interactivity,” and “hypertextuality” (p. 201). These differences, he wrote, give online journalism the role as a “fourth type of journalism” (Deuze, 2008, p. 201) separate from its traditional counterparts. While obviously different in technological function, and perhaps more rich in potential, it still seems natural, and even necessary at times, to compare the traits of online news to existing models in order to measure the content against the legacy description of news (e.g., Fenton, 2011; Shaver, 2010). Perhaps these are not the worst comparisons online news sites can draw. “Online journalists are still influenced by remnants of past traditions, such as the prioritization of an information-gathering and provision orientation and a distrust of the internet [*sic*] as a source of knowledge” (Mitchelstein & Boczkowski, 2009, p. 563) — in other words, the “right way” of doing journalism (Hartley, 1982).

In its newness, the types of sites that fall within the realm of online news are sometimes unrefined and ill defined. In a study of the credibility of online news sites, for example, Chung, Nam, and Stefanone (2012) used a participant survey to compare the perceived credibility of six online news sources. The authors chose a pair of mainstream

online sources (USAToday.com and NYTimes.com), a pair of aggregating headline sources (Google News and Yahoo News), and a pair of what they called “independent” news sites (Drudge Report and Axis of Logic). They found that respondents do not believe independent news sites to be highly credible. The authors suggested that the independent sites’ genesis as “gossip sheets for political events” may have injured their status (Chung et al., p. 181).

However, the sites used as analogues for independent online news sites in this study were hardly representative of all independent news. The Drudge Report, for instance, more resembles a news aggregating weblog than it does an independent online investigative news site such as ProPublica. Axis of Logic, meanwhile, overtly identifies an “enemy” in its mission statement, in this case the “Corporate Global Empire” (“Axis mission,” 2003, para. 3). While some independent online non-profit news sites in this study may carry strong opinions against the traditional press, they certainly do not designate an “enemy.”

Political weblogs are another form of online content dissemination. Depending on the structure and purpose of the blog, one might feasibly view it as an independent site that conveys news. However, blogs often are defined separately from independent online news organizations and therefore will not be recognized in this study. Blood (2002) characterized weblogs in three ways: “short form journals,” long form notebooks, and aggregators or filters (p. 6). Drezner and Farrell (2004) defined weblogs as “a web page with minimal to no external editing” (p. 5). Weblogs have also been framed as a website that any average guy “in his pajamas” could create and maintain (Jones & Himelboim, 2010, p. 272). Many independent online news sites, however, are operated by former

journalists and even supervised by an editorial staff (Herskowitz, 2011), two concepts that seem to place these sites in a category that more resembles a traditional media model, at least operationally.

For the purpose of this study, an independent online news site will be defined as a website that reports news to the public, has a format and output that structurally resembles traditional journalism sites, and discloses a journalistic mission, goal, or professional practice. These qualities make the content produced a candidate for syndication in mainstream sources, which is a phenomenon that lends importance to this study.

Online Non-Profit News Sites

Independent online news sites can be broken down a step further. While independent commercial sites that sustain on advertising revenue do exist (Holcomb et al., 2011), this study focuses specifically on the unique non-profit news model.

When discussing non-profit news models, longtime publications such as the *Christian Science Monitor* and the United Kingdom's *The Guardian* often serve as referents, as does ProPublica in the online-only realm (see Akst, 2009; Giles, 2010; Guthrie, 2009; Herskowitz, 2011; Kirchhoff, 2009; Strupp, 2009). Shaver (2010) defined a "non-profit" entity as one that injects revenue back into the organization rather than paying out profits to shareholders. Many non-profit sites, including the sites under study, have become popular places for former legacy journalists to find work (Herskowitz, 2011; Schoenburg, 2009; Strupp, 2009). It is likely that this authority has afforded these news sites some level of legitimacy, particularly in the statehouse. Press access rules in 16 states specifically include language addressing "social journalists" ("Media access,"

2011). Of those 16 states, 13 provide these non-traditional journalists the same access to proceedings as their mainstream counterparts, often under the caveat that they can demonstrate proof of employment at an “established news organization” (“Media access,” 2011).

Online non-profit news sites also have gained legitimacy through their outputs. ProPublica, a non-profit news site specializing in investigative reporting, has won two Pulitzer Prizes — one in 2010, which was the first Pulitzer awarded to an online organization, and one in 2011, which was the first Pulitzer awarded to an organization for a story that did not appear in print (“About ProPublica,” n. d.).

Despite this recognition, scholars are careful to assess the potential future value of online non-profit newsrooms. Shaver (2010) acknowledged and supported the claim that such entities can fill a gap in journalism as commercial news entities struggle through economic woes, but he tempered his statement, noting that “not even the strongest supporters of non-profit media believe they will replace for-profit news organizations” (p. 26). Fenton (2011), too, was cautious, noting that non-profit entities have a long way to go to compete with mainstream sites. That said, Shaver (2010) hinted that the best chance for non-profit news sites to succeed lies at the local level where gaps need to be filled.

This study will step one rung higher on the governmental ladder to focus on sites that cover state government news. Ultimately, the study aims to investigate the ideology of the content produced by these sites.

Ideology of Online Non-Profit News Sites

In 2011, six scholars with Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Journalism published the most comprehensive and perhaps the only empirical study that

examined several of the concepts outlined here. Holcomb et al. (2011) utilized a quantitative content analysis to study the ideology of 46 national-level and state-level independent online news sites, most of them non-profit sites. To carry out the study, they designed special codebooks to guide them through the content analysis and the analysis of the site self-descriptions, including ideological claims in mission statements and codes of ethics. Holcomb et al. (2011) studied only sites that did not produce a print component and were not created before 2005.

In the content analysis of the site outputs, Holcomb et al. (2011) analyzed articles, multimedia components, and interactive posts, such as blogs. Holcomb et al. (2011) determined ideology by coding for “story theme,” “range of viewpoints,” and “targets of exposés” (p. 43). In addition to the content, they audited the overall transparency of the site — a measure of the degree of which the sites explicitly listed the identity of their funders. From that data, Holcomb et al. (2011) drew conclusions based on a comparison of the results.

In all, Holcomb et al. (2011) concluded that roughly half the sites produced an ideology, and the same portion of stories reported only one side of an issue. They determined that sites operating under a parent group, and sites whose funding could be traced primarily to one organization, were most often ideologically slanted. They found that for-profit sites were less ideological. They determined that balanced news often came from sites that had more reporters, were more transparent, and had multiple sources of revenue. Overall, they concluded, “The topics covered on these sites often correlated with the political orientation of the sites and their backers” (Holcomb, 2011, p. 3).

“Backers,” in the latter conclusion, seems a purposefully ambiguous term. In some cases, the *financial* backers of the site were undeterminable. For example, the Watchdog.org sites almost uniformly cite the Franklin Center as their primary supporter. However, Holcomb et al. (2011) could not specifically determine the Franklin Center funders. In cases like this, Holcomb et al. (2011) explored the background of the individuals who led the organization, and the researchers used the results to draw a sketch of the organization’s potential ideology.

Finally, Holcomb et al. (2011) acknowledged that with time and experience, these sites might improve. They also noted that the landscape should be expected to change. Indeed, several sites have folded since their study. The American Independent News Network, for example, was once the parent to nine online non-profit news sites (Holcomb et al., 2011). Save for the Colorado Independent, the network has dismantled and now operates primarily as a single parent site with correspondents across the country (“About American Independent,” n. d.).

Research Questions

The research undertaken by Holcomb et al. (2011) was rigorous and captured a wide breadth of online non-profit news sites. However, this area of study needs a qualitative examination of site content — one that allows multiple codes and categories to emerge from the data in lieu of creating a codebook prior to the analysis. In setting out to describe and interpret that content, this study will investigate the question:

RQ1: What is the ideological nature of the statehouse government coverage disseminated by the online non-profit news sites explored in this study?

As noted, the popular audience is most familiar with the orientation of the content in the mainstream press. In order to place the nature of the content produced by online non-profit news sites in a context familiar to mainstream news consumers, this research will also explore the question:

RQ2: How does the state government coverage provided by the online non-profit news organizations in this study compare ideologically to corresponding coverage disseminated by the traditional press in the state?

This study is not a hunt to criticize or generalize online non-profit news sites but rather to investigate, describe, and interpret the outputs some of them produce. Should the void of mainstream state government coverage continue to grow, more non-profit organizations might enter the fold, both as independent websites and through mainstream syndication. Media transparency is an important factor in a consumer's choice of news, but it is arguably one not often surveyed in the independent realm.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Sampling

To answer these research questions, this study utilized a qualitative, constant comparative approach that began with a micro- and macro-level, open-coding textual analysis to investigate the manifest and latent ideology contained in the outputs of online non-profit news sites. Three sites were selected, purposefully chosen based on a set of criteria that best fit the description of the study's purpose (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

To build an initial list of potential sites, a Google search was conducted using the search terms "state government" or "state politics," "independent" or "non-profit," and "news." Additionally, the online non-profit news sites sampled in the Holcomb et al. (2011) study were revisited to determine activity and applicability. Throughout this process, a set of macro-level criteria was utilized to immediately exclude search results that did not fit the purpose. First, sites that appeared dormant were excluded. "Dormant" in this case was defined as a site that had posted no new content within a month of the date the search was conducted. Second, sites created prior to 2006 were excluded. This step was taken in order to sample sites that were created during the period of significant decline in mainstream statehouse political coverage (Dorroh, 2009). Sites created in 2006 and after were determined to be the most likely to have been formed for the purpose of filling that void. Third, sites that did not explicitly identify themselves as a "non-profit," "501 (c)(3)," or "donor-supported" organization were excluded. It should be noted here that the entire list of Watchdog.org sites was kept regardless of whether the member site specifically used one of these terms in its description. This is because the Watchdog.org

parent site explains the mission and the non-profit status of the project and links directly to each of its active member sites through a “states” tab on its homepage. Fourth, sites that did not emphasize statehouse government news were excluded. In a few cases, sites covering a variety of topics were kept if they included “government” or “politics” navigation links, provided those links contained a substantial amount of relevant posts.

This sampling strategy built a base list of 29 potential online non-profit news sites. From here, the resulting list was trimmed based on the posting proficiency of the sites. This selection strategy rests on the assumption that frequent posting more effectively fills the statehouse coverage void, which some sites claim as central to their mission. Sites were kept if they posted five or more times during the seven-day span leading up to the date of sampling, though one site was eliminated because its makeup better fit the definition of blog as it produced original content but also aggregated content written by a third party. This left 15 potential sites that fit the basic description and purpose of the study. Each covered the legislative politics of a different state.

A final set of criteria took into consideration the political makeup of the state legislatures being covered. The idea here was to ensure a diverse sample (Creswell, 2007) rather than studying the coverage of three sites reporting on the politics of one dominant party. To accomplish this, the online non-profit news site locations were compared using 2013 legislative control data maintained by StateScape (2013). The number of seats controlled by each party (both the House and Senate) were added up and divided by the number of total seats in that legislature. This produced a percentage of majority control. To ensure that the study observed sites covering a state with a relative balance in party control, resulting percentages closest to 50% were surveyed as possible samples. Care

was also taken to ensure no two sites were chosen from the same non-profit grouping, such as those under the Watchdog.org umbrella.

This strategy yielded Minnesota, Pennsylvania, and Texas. Pennsylvania and Texas are each controlled by a Republican Party majority, but each has a strong Democratic Party presence. Minnesota has the opposite composition, a Democratic Party edge with a strong Republican Party presence. MinnPost, the Texas Tribune, and the Pennsylvania Independent, a Watchdog.org site, served as the subjects of the study.

Procedure

RQ1 set out to describe the ideological nature of the statehouse government coverage provided by these online non-profit news sites. Van Dijk (1998a) discussed ideology in terms of a continuous discourse and also noted the importance of context. With the central goal of mining for potential ideological properties, it was necessary to choose a sample that yielded the content richest in potential ideology. A continuous timeline or calendar-based sample allowed for exploration into how online non-profit news sites and the mainstream media covered similar events or made news judgments that led either entity to ignore or miss stories picked up by the other. Continuity also allowed for context to remain intact. Presuppositions and implications might have directly or indirectly referenced previous events (Van Dijk, 1998b), and therefore knowledge of the context was important to maintain.

The three state legislatures included in this study were in session simultaneously during a 133-day span in early 2013 (State Net, 2013). This sampling strategy sought a midpoint of that duration. A 22-day, roughly three-week span from March 4, 2013, to March 25, 2013, was chosen. This sample captured an important time period during

which the viability and value of legislation were debated and bills killed or prepared for committee, House, or Senate hearings and votes. Content relating to state government procedures produced during this timeframe underwent a qualitative textual analysis.

RQ2, meanwhile, aimed to determine how the content provided by online non-profit news sites compared ideologically to the corresponding coverage disseminated by the traditional press. The Associated Press bureau from each state was chosen as an analogue for the traditional press because of its pervasiveness in the mainstream, seemingly an indicator of perceived ideological neutrality in a traditional newsroom sense. The Associated Press statehouse news content was analyzed in original form — as written and published to the wire. In cases where multiple versions of the same story existed, the final or most complete version published that calendar day was studied.

A NewsBank database search was used to compile relevant, state government content disseminated on the Associated Press wire. Relevant, statehouse-related content produced by the online non-profit news sites was harvested by navigating the archive links on each website. References to lawmaking, policy debate, and government proceedings were used to filter content. Stories relating to election campaigns or agency appointments were excluded in order to focus primarily on policy and lawmaking, though stories investigating or exposing state lawmakers and officials were kept.

The textual outputs under study included the display type and the body of articles. Articles clearly labeled “commentary” or “editorial” were excluded. With editorials, the individual identity and organizational position of the author begins to become important. Depending on the rank of the individual, the article might not necessarily speak for the organization, but rather strictly for the individual. With the goal of keeping this analysis

at the organizational level by examining the articles presented as straight news, these commentary pieces were excluded. Guest columns also were excluded from the analysis as the writer could not fairly be considered an embedded member of the non-profit or mainstream group and therefore might have skewed an organizational analysis. Lastly, news agencies, particularly the Associated Press, might occasionally run stories without bylines. It is possible that this content was aggregated from another source, or perhaps contributed by another newspaper. Because of this unknown variable, only articles with a byline bearing the name of an author were studied.

In all, this sampling strategy yielded 201 articles fitting the preceding criteria — 91 online non-profit news site articles and 110 Associated Press articles. By state, the sample yielded 36 MinnPost articles and 37 Minnesota Associated Press articles, 21 Pennsylvania Independent articles and 22 Pennsylvania Associated Press articles, and 34 Texas Tribune articles and 51 Texas Associated Press articles.

The text underwent a round of open and in-vivo coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) through the lens of Van Dijk's (1998a) theory of ideology and method of analyzing ideology in discourse (Van Dijk, 1998b) and Tuchman's (1972) description of objectivity. One fourth of the entire data was coded, and the results analyzed through the sensitizing concepts (Padgett, 2004) outlined above in order to develop a codebook. The codebook was then used to recode the original data and to code the remaining data. Finally, the data underwent a round of axial coding (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) to build macro-scale categories and themes that were used to visualize connections between and among the sensitizing concepts and in turn aid in the interpretation of the content through the theoretical lens.

The coding process employed a constant comparative method in which each data set — the content of each of the three non-profit sites and each of the three Associated Press bureaus — was coded evenly and by the calendar day of production. This allowed the maximum set of pertinent codes to emerge. The ideology of each online non-profit news site and the ideology of each state's Associated Press bureau content were assessed separately to create a content description of each individual entity. This action attempted to satisfy the explorative goal of RQ1 and provided the initial data needed to investigate RQ2.

RQ2 compared the content disseminated by the online non-profit news sites to the mainstream press. By constraining the data comparison to calendar day, and by confining the comparison to the coverage originating within each individual state (e.g. comparing the Minnesota Associated Press coverage to the MinnPost coverage), interpretations were made based on the newsroom decision-making of each entity (e.g. the topics covered, the evidence provided, the viewpoints reported, etc.). This strategy was effective when comparing the coverage of the same event. The final step in exploring RQ2 was to take the results of this comparison and combine it with the results that emerged from the initial coding session. This created an overall, macro-level portrait that described the ideological differences between online non-profit news sites and the traditional press.

These methodological steps provide valuable insight into the overall ideological nature of online non-profit news sites. It paints a portrait of these sites and displays it against the backdrop of the traditional press. Furthermore, it provides a glimpse into the potential motivations latently held by the operators of these sites. The traditional press has for years operated with the interest of objectivity in mind. Traditional news

consumers have an expectation for reasonably balanced news. With more and more mainstream beat writers vacating their statehouse posts, it is important to build an understanding of the alternative content and coverage emerging from the state capitols.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

In order to understand the results of the analysis on a state-by-state, organizational level, it is helpful first to describe the results of the constant comparative textual analysis on a macro scale, exploring the ideological components that emerged from and guided the analysis of the entire body of data.

Mapping Ideological Themes and Categories

In all, 11 ideological categories emerged from the textual analysis through the sensitizing concepts presented by Van Dijk (1998a; 1998b) and Tuchman (1972). The emerging categories were combined with those sensitizing concepts and with axial codes to create a hierarchical, thematic model of ideology tailored to this study (see Figure 1). This model can be used to visualize the components through which ideologies manifested in this analysis and might ultimately be applicable to future analyses of a similar ilk.

The first step in describing this model is to build on Van Dijk's (1998a) idea that context serves as an important lens through which to view ideology. Therefore the entire model is embedded within a "context cloud" that represents the individual and social functions, roles, memberships, etc., that constitute a personally and socially constructed belief.

Next, there are three categorical branches in the model, with "description," "attribution," and "coherence" serving as the branch headings. *Description*, itself an emerging category from the textual analysis, was used to represent the broad characterization of individuals, groups, and issues through polarization — positive or negative language and overall representation — rather equivalent to the definition of

“description” provided by Van Dijk (1998b). The sensitizing concepts of *implication* and *presupposition* also emerged as categories. It was found that implied propositions were closely related to the more overtly stated presuppositions in that authors used both tactics to develop a frame. This frame was used to guide the reader toward an assessment of the issue being discussed. *Emphasis* was a fourth emerging category on the description branch. Article authors often stressed certain concepts or topics as important via prominent placement or reiteration. This emphasis revealed what the author considered most important in a story, which in turn spoke to ideology.

The coherence branch of the model includes the article’s structural and topical components that serve to construct the overall meaning of the text. The *topic* category, of course, references the prevailing themes discussed in the articles. In aggregate, an assessment of ideology can be made through examination of a news organization’s selection of these topics, especially their frequency and genre. The structure of the article was comprised of various *technical strategies*, or the use of literary devices, story forms, and voice. In line with Tuchman’s (1972) description of objectivity, story structure also took into account *conflicting possibilities*, or the presentation of information that examined the original proposition from a different or opposing vantage point — essentially the “other sides” of the story. Both of these structural elements were also commonly used to establish a frame.

The middle branch of the model harbors components of attribution. This study was most interested in the attribution of information to categories of *referents* and *sources*. Sources were considered to be individuals, groups, or fact-based documents (e.g. reports, studies, polls, etc.) that were cited as providers of information to the article.

Referents, meanwhile, were defined as descriptive terms used to reference an actor or actors in an event. They were “referred” to or acted upon, but were not necessarily active information providers. Quite often referents were vague groupings of individuals aggregated to provide perceived support for a statement, a tactic that will be elaborated upon in the next section. These referents and sources served as the origin of *evidence* and *viewpoints*, the final two emerging categories. Tuchman (1972) said that a component of objectivity is the presentation of “supporting evidence.” However, the results of this study make it important to note that there is a distinct and dividing difference between evidence and viewpoints. Evidence, for the purpose of this study, was considered to be material presented as fact, devoid of opinion, and used to fill in the context of a story, to corroborate a viewpoint, or to support a proposition. Viewpoints, meanwhile, were considered to be value judgments or opinions.

At the midpoint of this model exists a fluid component described by this study as “news judgment.” The concepts and categories through which this news judgment runs seemed most susceptible to purposeful or subconscious manipulation by the news organizations. This manipulation through various editorial decisions often conveyed aspects of the organization’s ideology as a whole.

The midpoint also serves to illustrate the connections between these concepts. Quite often more than one of these ideological components manifest within the same sentence, or even within the same word. This interdependence between concepts created the necessity to consider all components at the same time. Ultimately, it was found that a positively or negatively charged polarization could be perceived by examining any of the components at this level, illustrated in the model by the multi-directional flow.

It was also at this level that two sub-branches emerged from the evidence and viewpoint categories. It was through evidence and viewpoint that tangible facts, ideas, and opinions were conveyed, building a substantive foundation of information upon which the stories could be built. These facts, ideas, and opinions were both attributed to (through paraphrasing) or quoted from individuals or groups. Evidence also was attributed to or quoted from documents. Furthermore, evidence and viewpoints came in unattributed forms. Unattributed evidence primarily materialized as background information, which brought the reader up to speed on past happenings or fleshed out the basic material facts of a bill, budget, or event. Quite often the sources of these background materials were not explicitly stated but rather assumed, often (but not always) benignly and in the spirit of narrative flow.

Unattributed viewpoints, however, were held beliefs of the author and presumably the organization that hired the author, edited the author's content, and approved the content for print. Unattributed viewpoints included author assessments, speculation, interpretation, or opinion.

At the lowest level, a second thread ties together the elements that make up the information in the article. Schudson (1978) called the allowance of a source to control his or her public image "news management," and in this study, news management emerged when evidence or viewpoints were quoted to or attributed to individuals or groups. Much of the information disseminated by non-profit news sites and the Associated Press was gathered from human sources or from organizations treated as singular entities. Both the online non-profit news sites and the Associated Press appeared to take information provided by these sources almost exclusively at face value, rarely vetting or fact checking

the information a source delivered in print, but instead allowing that source to be the sole information disseminator. Whether or not that information was placed in quotes or attributed in paraphrased form had little impact on the overall ideology. It could be argued that the use of “judicious quotes” in an article, as Tuchman (1972) put it in her description of objectivity, was an attempt by the news organization to separate itself from accountability for the information’s veracity. However, accountability is an important component of sound journalism. A lack of further investigation into a source claim might turn the author into a sort of ideological passageway for those managing the news.

There is one additional possibility regarding the use of information provided by individuals or groups. News organizations might purposefully select information that allows it to make an ideological assessment. The information used might be slanted toward one side or might set up an argument that “proves” right or wrong a piece of evidence or a viewpoint from another source. Beyond all of this, the most sound and supported source of information came in the form of fact-based documents. Documents don’t need to “remember” or “talk,” arguably lending them more credibility. Yet, documents were very rarely used as sources in the sample studied.

Recurring Findings and Broad Descriptions

The model described above explains the ideological framework that emerged from this study. However, one important point must be considered: While it is visually helpful to map the individual components in a top-down manner as demonstrated, it is not as useful to structure the explanation of the results in the same manner since the entire context must be taken into account when analyzing a text. Inside the body of a text, the components react more like an interconnected web. Each component must be considered

in order to explore the ideological meaning. Therefore the most effective format of presenting these results is in a narrative form.

Before delving into the site descriptions, however, it will first be helpful to describe some of the key findings that traversed the bulk of the data set.

One consistent finding involved the manner in which evidence and viewpoints were presented. Tuchman (1972) said that in objectively written stories, material facts tended to appear in the opening paragraphs. The results of this analysis seem to corroborate that to a point. Indeed, most stories included a nut paragraph — or “nut graf” — that explained the basic who, what, where, etc., of the event. However, the nature of the material facts presented in the nut graf s varied. Quite often less of an emphasis was placed on factual evidence in favor of an emphasis on the viewpoints of individuals or groups. These viewpoints were packaged high in the story and presented in a way that made the value judgments appear like another fact. For example, from the Texas AP: “Rep. Mary Gonzalez, D-El Paso, told the crowd the fight for equal rights is tough but necessary.” This assertion is a value judgment — a viewpoint — of the official, but it is also something that was presumably said during the proceedings, a *factual* account.

In the cases where truly fact-based evidence was packaged prominently in the story, the evidence many times had a sort of “empty-calorie” quality. Empty-calorie evidence highlighted the *process* of getting a bill heard, passed, and advanced through the legislature — similar to the “horserace,” poll-watching style of coverage during election campaigns. For instance, the first three paragraphs of this Pennsylvania AP story included several facts regarding vote count, overall support, etc., but provided little information explaining or making sense of the effects of the bill:

A Republican plan designed to break down Pennsylvania's Depression-era system of state-owned liquor stores passed a critical test Wednesday, leaving the measure poised to be approved by the House and sent to the state Senate. The GOP majority easily defeated a "gut and replace" amendment sponsored by the ranking Democrat on the Liquor Control Committee, Rep. Paul Costa of Allegheny County, and the bill could pass the chamber during an unusual Thursday afternoon session that was quickly scheduled. Krystjan Callahan, chief of staff to the House Majority Leader, Mike Turzai, declined to say whether he was sure the votes for final passage were there. But the 108-91 defeat of Costa's proposal was strong evidence.

Stories that focused more on "background evidence," rich in facts that educate the reader on the details of a bill or describe the effect that the legislation might have on democracy, tended to be thicker and more explanatory, and ultimately less ideologically slanted. This balance between the presentation of viewpoint and the presentation of evidence helped to guide the evaluation of an article's overall ideology.

The nature in which this information was attributed also emerged as an interesting finding. The news organizations quite often attributed evidence and viewpoints to grouped referents that were rather vague in quantity and identity. For instance: "The state estimates the direct economic impact at almost \$1.4 billion. But *critics* (emphasis added) see the tax credit program as little more than a giveaway to Hollywood film studios that does little to produce long-lasting or high-paying jobs in the state." This passage from a Pennsylvania Independent article uses the word "critics" to summarize a quantifiably unknown, anonymous group. Vague groupings like these were utilized by the news

organizations in a few distinct ways. First, the news organizations used them to introduce a viewpoint that might or might not exist in order to dispute or support the claim. Second, they used them as a way to appear objective through the presentation of a conflicting possibility when in fact the news organization might only be summarizing what it has uncovered in recent reports or heard through the “buzz” around the community. Finally, the news organizations used vague groupings to transmit the appearance that “multiple” people shared in the viewpoint, thereby giving the viewpoint a perceived authority when in fact the actual number of people supporting the viewpoint was unknown. These vague groupings were oftentimes used in paraphrased evidence or viewpoints that were placed directly before a quote from an individual that seemingly supported or disputed the preceding claim.

When not citing vague groupings, the sources and referents used by the news organizations came in several forms. The news organizations overwhelmingly relied on information delivered by mouth — human sources ranging from officials, to experts, to spokespeople, to professors, to lawyers, to lobbyists, to plain folks in the community. Information was also attributed to specific organizations, quoted collectively but like an individual. For example, a passage from the Texas Tribune directly quoted a bureaucratic body: “The Legislative Budget Board . . . estimated that ‘there could be significant costs to a municipality or a county related to the enforcement, seizure and impoundment of a big cat or nonhuman primate.’”

Overall, the news organizations almost never utilized fixed sources, such as documents, and they almost never provided indication that the information they were attributing to a source had been vetted or confirmed.

Finally, it should be noted that evidence most often was paraphrased, while viewpoints frequently were quoted directly, a tactic that corroborates Tuchman's (1972) description of the use of quotation marks in stories striving for objectivity.

Another finding involved the frequent emphasis news organizations placed on elements of conflict — commonly, political conflict. In articles covering politically partisan and contentious issues, such as the gay marriage debate in Minnesota and the Medicaid expansion debate in Texas, the emphasis on political conflict was rather obvious as stories pitted the liberal viewpoint against the conservative viewpoint. However, a subtler indicator of conflict emphasis was discovered in the citation of a source or referent's political party. The party to which a House or Senate member belonged was most often cited using the letters "R" or "D" in aside information, such as, "Sen. Wendy Davis, D-Fort Worth," in an example from a Texas Tribune story. At times, however, the "Republican" or "Democrat" descriptor preceded or followed the official's name, which emphasized the political party by treating it like a title, such as in "Wichita Falls Republican state Rep. Jim Pitts," from the same Tribune story. Party citation was mostly reserved for lower-ranking officials in the House and Senate. Higher-ranking majority and minority leaders rarely came attached with a political party citation. Party citation was almost never used when introducing the state's governors, lieutenant governors, or others in the executive branch. So, when a story did include a party citation for one of these individuals, the governor's party especially, it often cued an emphasis on political conflict. Likewise, in stories discussing issues that the news organization did not believe carried a liberal vs. conservative polarization, party citations were sometimes left off — even when introducing lower-ranking officials. Lastly, just as "partisanship" was

emphasized, so was “bipartisanship.” If two parties were working together on an issue, the stories frequently noted this “reaching-across-the-aisle” style of compromise.

Analysis of Online Non-Profit News Site Content by State

These universal findings help provide a starting point for an analysis of each online non-profit news site. The portrait of each site includes an establishment of context through a description of the site’s mission statement, ethical code, and other readily available information. It also includes an overall assessment of the content provided by the site and the key factors that informed that interpretation. Each section closes with a series of exemplars and passages, along with an ideological analysis, meant to illustrate how these interpretations emerged from the text. A final statement attempting to place each site’s content on a political spectrum is also included at the end of each section.

After describing each site individually, a synthesized description of the statehouse coverage provided by online non-profit news sites as a whole is presented in an attempt to satisfy the explorative goal of RQ1.

MinnPost

The results of the textual analysis suggest that MinnPost content trends toward the favoring of Democratic and liberal values. This is indicated in the site’s news topic selection, the use of Democratic and liberal sources early in stories to set the desired frame, the implications and presuppositions that corroborate that frame, and the use of selective evidence to support that frame. It is also indicated in its use of technical strategies that attempt to connect the reader personally with actors reacting positively to liberal issues, the presentation of author viewpoints supportive of liberal agendas, and the overall polarizing descriptions that tend to portray Republicans and conservatives in a

less than flattering light. Overall, conflict is highlighted frequently and story tone is at many times informal and loose. Authors of MinnPost content are also highly likely to insert their own opinions into stories through assessments and interpretation.

A reader visiting the “About us” section of MinnPost’s website would not necessarily be cued to these trends. However, it could be argued that the “built-in bias” toward liberal values that Kennedy and Cameron (2007) discussed could emerge from the makeup of its reporting staff. Seven different reporters contributed statehouse news coverage to MinnPost during the timeframe sampled for this study and, according to the biographical summaries provided for these reporters on the MinnPost website, five of them wrote for, or might still contribute as freelancers to traditional news publications. Important to note for these results is that one of the reporters is described as a former columnist who worked for a traditional newspaper. It was indeed found that his outputs tended to be looser in tone and more ideologically slanted. Yet, this reporter was not specifically labeled a columnist for MinnPost, and his stories were not labeled “opinion” or “commentary.” Furthermore, the reporter covered statehouse events and published topically unique stories, not editorial sidebars to some other piece of content. Therefore, from the viewpoint of a casual reader, and indicative of the packaging on the website, the content was being presented as a standard report, which for the purpose of this study, fit into an organizational-level analysis. Contextually, the mainstream background of this reporter and the four others who were bred in traditional mediums primarily placed MinnPost content in the professional role of mainstream journalism. The reporters’ contextual functions and purposes originated in the watchdog nature of traditional press reporting, which generally seeks to give voice to the voiceless.

However, recalling Van Dijk's (1998a) contextual notion of affiliation — the influence of an organization's and values and ideals upon its employees — it must be noted that the reporters' working situations are somewhat different. With MinnPost, they are working for an electronic-only medium that is neither privately nor publicly owned, and with those changes might come new loyalties and goals. Only a partial description of potential MinnPost affiliation can be drawn from its "About us" section. MinnPost got its start thanks to a combined \$825,000 grant from four families that are named on its website ("About MinnPost," n. d.). The site also lists the names of its major foundation contributors, its board of directors, and its advisory council. It does not list individual donors by name beyond the upstart contributors. MinnPost reports that "Major foundation support" came from:

[T]he Blandin Foundation, Otto Bremer Foundation, Bush Foundation, Carolyn Foundation, Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, Ethics and Excellence in Journalism Foundation, John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Martin and Brown Foundation, The McKnight Foundation, The Minneapolis Foundation, Pohlada Family Foundation, and The Saint Paul Foundation. ("About MinnPost," n. d., para. 6).

These major foundations are listed in alphabetical order and there is no indication of how much funding any of these foundations provide in relation to each other.

As for its collective purpose, MinnPost suggests its long-term goal is to be self-sustained on donor contributions from "corporate sponsors, advertisers, and members" ("About MinnPost," n. d., para. 3). The site publishes content every weekday with "limited" content posted on Saturday ("About MinnPost," n. d.). It calls itself a

nonpartisan publication that does not endorse a political candidate (“About MinnPost,” n. d.). It describes its content as “news and analysis” and pledges to sign editorial copy that represents the organization’s position on issues (“About MinnPost,” n. d.). Overall, it claims to “encourage broad-ranging, civil discussion from many points of view (“About MinnPost,” n. d., para. 2).

MinnPost did seek comment from differing points of view. Its sourcing and referents throughout were relatively balanced between liberal and conservative figures. However, much of the content description was weighted favorably toward Democrats — also known as “DFLers” (Democratic-Farmer-Labors Party) in Minnesota. The viewpoints and evidence provided by DFL officials tended to appear first in the stories analyzed. This prominent placement set the tone for the discussion and in turn guided the narrative down a liberal-leaning path. Republican officials and conservative voices were usually given an opportunity to provide their viewpoints. However, their opinions tended to appear in later paragraphs. On a macro scale, this indicated a polarization that deemphasized conservatism.

In coding for this polarization on a micro scale, it helps to target stories covering politically charged topics. MinnPost favored stories in which conflict was a theme. It also focused on stories highlighting Democratic legislation. Among the topics identified by MinnPost to be of importance — illustrated by the topic’s recurrence and story length — included legislation that would legalize same-sex marriage (opposed by Republicans), gun control legislation that would require universal background checks (opposed by Republicans and rural Democrats), the state’s creation of a health care exchange (opposed by Republicans), and the development of the state’s budget. The latter paid

particular attention to the governor’s proposal for a business-to-business sales tax and a House proposal to create a temporary tax on the wealthy in order to pay off a public school debt (both opposed by Republicans). MinnPost stories did not prominently highlight any legislation proposed by Republicans.

In many of these stories, negatively polarized descriptions blanketed Republicans in general and also covered traditionally conservative groups, such as what MinnPost described as the “pro-gun crowd” — including the National Rifle Association (NRA) — and opponents of same-sex marriage.

In the case of same-sex marriage, the headline of a March 8 story read, “Political boomerang: GOP's defeated amendment put same-sex marriage on fast track.” The headline referenced a constitutional amendment proposed by Republicans in 2012 that would have defined marriage as between a man and a woman. The emphasis here was placed on the amendment’s defeat and gave possession of that defeat to Republicans. In describing the result as a “boomerang,” the headline implied that the Republicans “ironically” — in the author’s words — aided the progress of same-sex marriage instead of hindering it as they had set out to accomplish. This headline set the tone for a negative description of Republicans and same-sex marriage opponents in general. The evidence presented in the story tended to favor the approval of same-sex marriage legislation. Evidence to the contrary was challenged. For instance, the author noted a *Minneapolis Star Tribune* newspaper poll that said 53% of Minnesota residents opposed same-sex marriage. The author followed this information by attributing viewpoints to DFL Rep. Steve Simon who expressed “surprise” at the results of the poll. The author then wrote:

But, like all polls on the negative side of poll numbers, he believes there are reasons for the results. “It’s all in the way you ask the polling question,” Simon said. He said he believes the key for most Minnesotans surrounds religious issues.

In the next paragraph, the author continued to frame the argument with this presupposition: “When they learn that the Minnesota law that would allow same-sex marriage ‘aggressively protects religions’ from being forced to perform same-sex marriages, a solid majority of Minnesotans will be comfortable with the law.”

A story five days later on the same topic headlined, “Marriage bill advances after emotional day of hearings” used language that framed the ideology of the site through implication. The absence of “gay” or “same-sex” in front of “marriage,” a common practice in many news reports, implied a frame that marriage should be for all, not just couples of the opposite gender. To begin the story, the author used a popular technical strategy, that of describing a scene — usually emotional — to connect with the reader on a personal level. The author told of a former Republican representative, Lynne Osterman, who entered a hearing on same-sex marriage, and upon beginning her testimony, “promptly burst into tears”:

Struggling, Osterman explained that she served a single term in the House as a Republican elected in New Hope. During her 2002-2004 term, she cast what she called a “politically expedient vote” in favor of Minnesota’s Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), banning gay marriage. “I regret it,” Osterman said. “I can tell you from experience that you will have to live knowing that a no vote is not fair, it’s not respectful and it’s not equal.” She’d been holding in her remorse for a long time, Osterman added, still choking back tears.

The author attempted to accomplish a few things with this passage. First, the description clearly favored the Democratic initiative to approve same-sex marriage. Secondly, the author selected a poignant bit of evidence that fit her frame — particularly that the woman speaking was a Republican. Third, this implied that Republicans might be internally conflicted in their stance against same-sex marriage and it implied that the Defense of Marriage Act was bad. The article then noted that the DFL representative sitting next to Osterman during her testimony was Karen Clark, “one of the first openly lesbian lawmakers in the country” and suggested that the lawmaker “did not know Osterman would be coming to the hearing.” This selection of evidence implied that Republicans are not only changing their minds but are doing so without prompting and for reasons beyond politics. The author followed with a supporting quote from Clark regarding Osterman’s appearance: “It was a wonderful surprise.” Conflicting possibilities were presented later in the story. The first presentation of information against same-sex marriage did not appear until paragraph 18. The author presented one conflicting viewpoint that suggests same-sex marriage would spur on lawsuits, but the author called the presentation of these claims “distortions at best,” a direct and unattributed rebuttal to the viewpoint.

In the gun control debate, MinnPost highlighted the dispute over two different DFL-sponsored background check bills in the House — one that would require universal background checks, and one that would require background checks only for sales at gun shows, what the author called “gun show loopholes” in a March 6 account. In that story, the DFL-representative’s “compromise bill” that was endorsed by the NRA was exposed for its lack of support among liberal groups, as introduced by the headline: “Hilstrom

finds that gun bill meant to unite quickly divides.” In the fourth paragraph, the author used a quote from a “plain folks source” representing “Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense” to criticize the bill, quoting the activist’s opinion that the bill is “just a band-aid [*sic*] over a huge problem.”² The next paragraph identified the NRA’s support of the bill and speculated the reasoning, implying that it is likely because the bill is weak:

The bill has the support of the National Rifle Association *presumably* (emphasis added) because it does nothing to require background checks on all gun sales and because it does nothing to restrict sales of military-style weapons or even the quantity of rounds in ammunition magazines.

“Does nothing to restrict” is ideologically negative language and implies that the legislation is not comprehensive enough. It is true that the overall description of this story took a somewhat negative stance toward the Democratic official pushing the compromise bill. However, that stance was in pursuit of the more liberal viewpoint that universal background checks would be the more effective option. To illustrate this point, the author seemed to infer an ability to read the mind of the official, essentially implying that she’s holding back: “Hilstrom, in her seventh term, refused to talk about her true feelings of the bill. Rather, she kept speaking of the importance of ‘passing a bill that will solve real problems.’”³ Finally, in a March 20 article, the author implied Republicans attending a

² The use of plain folks — everyday people not in positions of power — was also found to be a technical strategy used to connect readers with a particular frame. Presumably, plain folks represent the “everyman,” and therefore make them easier to relate to. Plain folks sources were used in this manner by other news organizations in this study.

³ This same kind of speculative “mind-reading” tactic also appears in a March 8 MinnPost story on same-sex marriage in which the author peers into House Speaker Paul Thissen’s “soul”: “[Gov. Mark] Dayton has since become much more an advocate of legalizing same-sex marriage and there’s little doubt that Thissen, in his soul, is supportive of the cause.”

hearing on background checks enjoyed the infighting among Democrats. The article followed with the presupposition that Republicans had ulterior motives for their conservative positions on other issues:

House Minority Leader Kurt Daudt was among the legislators who came to observe. He — and other Republicans — were smiling a lot over the DFL struggles. Understand, Republicans truly believe that the combination of guns and gay marriage will put them back in the majority in the Legislature in the 2014 elections.

In a series of stories covering the health care exchange debate, MinnPost concentrated on the partisan divide between Democrats and Republicans. The first story discussed the early shaping of the “landmark” health insurance exchange. The next story covered the passage of the bill out of the Senate, but emphasized in the second paragraph the single DFL official who voted against the bill. Two follow-up stories emphasized how the Republicans were “pressuring” the Democrats to compromise, while the following two stories focused on the Democrats “racing” to clean up the language of the bill in order to get it implemented. The series unfolded as a sort of “battle” by the Democrats to overcome Republican attacks on the plan. It concluded the series on March 20, with a celebratory story quite positive of the exchange and of the bill’s signing. The presentation of a conflicting viewpoint was brief and utilized vague group referents in an attempt to satisfy objectivity. The passage read: “For all of the enthusiasm, however, the plan does have its critics, including Republican legislators — and the Minnesota Chamber of Commerce, which is unhappy with several of its provisions.” The author groups “critics” and “Republican legislators” to portray a negative viewpoint.

MinnPost did file a story that described Democrats negatively overall, but managed to keep the conversation and criticism primarily within the walls of the Democratic ranks. In a March 15 budget story headlined, “Dayton-Senate DFL ‘switcheroo’? Lawmakers may consider some of his dropped sales-tax provisions,” the author suggested Democratic senators were considering elements of a business-to-business tax plan that had been dropped earlier from Democratic Gov. Mark Dayton’s plan. Dayton had been met with criticism from business owners over his plan to tax services such as advertising and legal counsel. The story suggested the Senate plan still included some of those provisions. However, the author gave prominence to House Democrats who criticized the move before allowing Republicans to comment in later paragraphs. Even then, the author selected Republican viewpoints that first praised the Democratic governor for dropping the plan. Again, the Republican voice was brief and presented in a single paragraph: “Republicans on Thursday celebrated Dayton’s decision to drop his sales tax proposal, but Senate Minority Leader David Hann also criticized DFLers for not completely taking off the table efforts to increase revenue through a sales tax restructuring.”

Lastly, one common tactic employed by MinnPost was to use content from secondary sources. In one instance, a MinnPost author wrote an entire story off of a report in the Duluth News Tribune, and in another case, the same author summarized a report in the Brainerd Dispatch. Many of the governor’s quotes were acquired through and attributed to these secondary sources. Most other times, the quotes were taken from speeches the governor made in front of various groups or in press conferences. It is difficult to discern how much of the governor’s evidence was actively acquired by

MinnPost and how much of it was recycled from secondary sources. This method of newsgathering might put MinnPost in danger of retransmitting the ideology of other news organizations.

Overall, MinnPost content would land rather left of center on the political spectrum well toward liberalism. The content was relatively ideologically slanted and often conveyed an ideology favorable of Democratic principles.

Pennsylvania Independent

Like all Watchdog.org sites, the Pennsylvania Independent is a project of the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity. It calls itself a “public interest journalism project dedicated to promoting open, transparent, and accountable state government” (“About Pennsylvania Independent,” n. d., para. 1). However, a few items separate the Independent from its Watchdog.org siblings. First, the Independent is one of the few sites with a unique Web design. It does not conform to a design template nor does it include “Watchdog” in its name, both common traits of the other sites in the group. Second, the Independent is one of the few sites in the group that has a unique “About us” section. Third, the Independent includes short biographical information for its reporting and editorial staff, which consists of two people.

While different in appearance, the Independent does no more than its parent sites to reveal its financial backers. The Independent says neither it nor the Franklin Center reveals its financial supporters in order to protect the donors’ identities (“About Pennsylvania Independent,” n. d.). The Independent claims that not even the reporting staff knows who funds the project, adding that this fact removes the reporters from any

conflict of interest, asserting that it does not participate in “quid pro quo” contributions (“About Pennsylvania Independent, n. d.,” para. 6).

The Independent’s “About us” page reads like a common “FAQ” section, posing questions in headings and answering them in text. Beneath the question, “Are you really non-partisan?” it answers, “Without a doubt,” and says it cares only about the facts and that it will “come after you whether you are a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or whatever” (“About Pennsylvania Independent,” n. d., para. 4).

Beneath the question, “Aren’t you biased?” it answers:

Everyone is biased. Anyone that suggests they aren’t is lying. ... But having a bias doesn’t mean you can have your own facts. The facts are the facts, and Pennsylvania Independent is committed to providing them to you. We’re not asking you to trust us. Test us by reading and commenting on our stories. (“About Pennsylvania Independent,” n. d., para. 5).

Beneath the Q & A section, the Independent introduces its editorial staff, which consists of a news reporter and a “bureau chief” who also serves as a reporter. The bureau chief is a former government writer for a traditional news media group and a former assignment editor for a television station (“About Pennsylvania Independent, n. d.). The biography for the news reporter says only that his work has appeared in several publications, most of them traditional news organizations (“About Pennsylvania Independent, n. d.).

Contextually, there are certainly clues as to the function and purpose of the individuals working for the Independent. While the response to the question, “Aren’t you biased?” tactically does not answer, “Yes,” the presupposition that “everyone is biased”

does enough to allow the reader to deduce that a bias will be possible — and perhaps even expected — in the content. Overtly, the site implies its bias is “reporting the facts” and “going after” whomever needs to be exposed in government, which places its function in the realm of a government watchdog. Its purpose is to promote an “open and transparent” government, which could be deemed ironic considering it operates as part of an organization kept running by clandestine financial contributors. As a result, the contextual affiliation of the site is somewhat foggy.

However, enough data is present in its functional description to deduce that the news site enters with a strong suspicion of government. The results of the textual analysis corroborate this evaluation. Overall, the descriptions emerging from the Independent content were negatively polarized toward government and lawmakers as a whole. This was evaluated through an analysis of coverage that frequently implied lawmaker unscrupulousness and corruption. It also materialized through the use of technical strategies, particularly narrative story structures that “spoke to” the reader through second-person language and implied that “the people” needed protecting.

Sourcing for these stories was somewhat diverse, often reaching outside the realm of government officials. However, officials still managed to control the bulk of the evidence and viewpoints that were presented — especially officials that belonged to the Republican Party. Yet, in circumstances where sourcing outside the official realm made sense, official viewpoints sometimes appeared later in the story or were favored less than viewpoints presented by individuals that helped progress the author’s thesis.

Ideologically, the Independent emphasized values favoring smaller government, spending cuts, and the oft cited “free market.” These concepts appeared in the news site’s

choice of repeating topics, which included stories involving state expenditures on the taxpayer dime, government exposés, and perceived support for free-market values, especially in the debate over the state’s proposal to privatize beer, wine, and liquor sales.⁴

In regard to government spending stories, “taxpayer” was one of the Independent’s favorite words. It appeared frequently in compound descriptors, such as “taxpayer-funded” and “taxpayer-subsidized.” It was used as a generic referent in vague groupings, and it was used as an adjective, such as in “taxpayer dollars.” In most references, it was used as a method of calling into question some kind of government spending.

A March 4 headline read: “College funding dilemma — should taxpayers support institutions or students?” Here, the author highlighted a disagreement between university professionals and state officials regarding the use of a \$361 million budget line for student aid. It refers to state universities as “taxpayer-subsidized universities,” a technical strategy that emphasizes the individual over the collective. It calls to the citizen and draws attention to the dollars he or she earns and gives to the government for allocating. It is an ideological ploy to personally connect with the individual that is concerned about the government’s use of *their* money. In another March 4 article, the Independent builds on this connection through a lead rather informal and cynical in tone. It is targeted at a state film tax credit: “Managers, sound crews, religious deities, moms and husbands often get thanked during awards speeches. But the state taxpayers who helped foot the bill? Not

⁴ Pennsylvania relies on a state-controlled alcohol distribution system through which citizens can purchase beer (usually in bulk quantities), wine, and liquor at state-licensed stores. Beer in small “takeout” quantities can also be purchased from licensed taverns, certain grocery stores, and facilities holding a restaurant license.

so much.” The lead is a clever play on the Hollywood movie scene and implies that taxpayers are slighted by the companies that gulp up public dollars with no “thanks.”

This focus on spending also appears in author frames borne out of selective emphasis. For instance, the Independent covered a financial crisis concerning passenger rail service from the state capital to Pittsburgh. The March 25 headline, “Harrisburg-to-Pittsburgh rail to carry \$3.8 million in costs annually,” gives the dollar sum prominent play. The Independent makes its position clear in one paragraph that describes the distance of the “windy 444-mile trip” to be “less than half that by car,” seemingly to imply that the rail is inefficient and therefore not worth the money needed to keep it running. It uses a selective viewpoint tactic in a subsequent quote attributed to Eric Montarti, described as an analyst for a “free-market think tank”: “‘I think we have to ask if that is really the proper role for the taxpayers,’ he said. ‘Is that something we should be subsidizing?’” In an objective report, the use of a “free-market think tank” source might be authoritatively questionable in its obscureness and “free-market” slant. However, the Independent challenged objectivity from the outset in its implied admission to being biased. Therefore its use of selective evidence cannot be considered surprising. It also was not isolated. The Independent talked to a member of a different “free-market think tank” in a March 18 report on the liquor privatization debate, and included an assessment of “political risks” from yet another free-market think tank source in a March 11 report on state pension debt.

When it comes to Independent reports that expose the government, content was usually focused on the misuse of public money or political corruption. A March 12 report exposes a Philadelphia area public transportation authority for what the Independent

implied to be wasteful spending. The first two paragraphs read: “The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority used three taxpayer-funded buses to take off-duty employees from Philadelphia to Harrisburg for a midday rally at the Capitol to support increased transportation funding.” Again, the use of the word “taxpayer” emphasizes the misuse of funds and it augments the negative implication by placing emphasis on the ironic nature of the trip — to lobby for more spending.

Beyond spending, the Independent exposed political corruption. On March 8, the Independent used information from a secondary source to report that Gov. Tom Corbett and his wife accepted gifts from lobbyists in 2010 and 2011. While the Independent noted that Gov. Corbett followed state ethics protocol by reporting the gifts and their value, it wrote, “[T]hat did not stop the Democratic Party of Pennsylvania from filing an ethics complaint.” Then, in a short series of stories, the Independent exposed a former Democratic state senator and several Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission executives through details emerging from grand jury testimony that claimed the senator and executives operated a “pay for play” system in which they awarded contracts to engineers that gave gifts, including political contributions. The Independent again noted in a March 13 story that the scandal “resulted in ‘untold millions’ of taxpayer dollars being misused and stolen” and also cited grand jury testimony to suggest that more wrongdoing took place than reported.

Perhaps the most damning language in an exposé came out of a March 11 article headlined: “Pension bonds would be risky, illegal maneuver to ease PA debt.” The author leads with an informal, “Sometimes the cure can be worse than the disease.” This informality clearly sets up the presupposition of the content that suggests the legislature’s

proposal to take out bonds to pay off a pension debt is illegal and risky. The move is, according to the report, against government regulations. However, a de-emphasized fact buried in the body of the text brings to light the sensational aspects of the article's overall contention. As it turns out, the rule is something that "could easily be reversed" by a vote, according to the Independent.

In an unrelated story on government pensions published March 12, the Independent described a bill that would make it harder for government employees convicted of violent crimes to collect a pension. The Independent drove its point home by noting that it is easier for white-collar criminals to collect a pension:

In other words, state lawmakers recently sent to prison for misusing taxpayer dollars for a litany of purposes can have their pensions revoked, but individuals who commit horrific crimes like those of former Penn State University football coach Jerry Sandusky can keep collecting their monthly checks from the state.

The strategy uses more sensation by emphasizing the negative aspects of the present law and embedding it within still-sore events that had occurred in the state.

Finally, the Independent covered the liquor privatization debate heavily during the timeframe sampled. The debate spurred conflict between Democrats and Republicans, and that was often highlighted in the stories. The Democrats were portrayed as protecting the unions that represented state-store workers. Their contention was that the closure of state stores would cause job loss. The Republicans, meanwhile, claimed that state-controlled alcohol distribution was an antiquated practice and that it was time to move to a more convenient model that would save consumers money. There was also a developing debate between beer brewers and beer distributors. The Independent teased

the ensuing debate in a March 15 “Week in Review” story predicting that the debates “are sure to steal headlines in the next week.” Of course, the Independent controls those headlines and made good on its prophecy with an in-depth privatization story on March 18. In this report, the Independent uses a literary style of storytelling to build the drama around the event. It opened with the journey of a man belonging to the “Coalition for Advancing Freedom” as he made his way to the capital for the hearing. Again, the use of a “plain folks” source seems to be a ploy used to connect with the everyday reader. The lead began: “A belief in free markets pushed Roger Howard out his southern Chester County home early Monday.” It followed with a quote from Howard stating that he doesn’t “believe in central control.” The article continued with a literary description of the union members on hand, carrying signs protesting Gov. Corbett’s “rhetoric” that privatization would help the state. While the article on the whole covers both viewpoints, subtle lexical elements seem to reveal the free-market ideology. For instance, the Independent refers to the state distribution of alcohol as “the state’s monopoly.” It also suggests the release of state distribution control would put it “in the hands of the marketplace.”

However, the Independent shows some indication of playing to both sides in a later story. On March 19, it published a story that weighed *against* privatization. The Independent reported that a beer brewer coalition believed privatization would give an unfair advantage to wine and liquor distributors. Under the changes in the plan, beer stores would have priority in also purchasing wine and liquor licenses. The brewers argued that this would create less shelf space for beer. Arguably, the Independent’s hang-

up on the topic could be attributed to the complication of bureaucracy still controlling the liquor laws. The free market is challenged in any scenario.

This emerged again in a pair of March 21 stories. First, the Independent returned to an investigation of the best “free-market” solution by laying out the license fee structure that gave discounts to current distributors but charged more than double the fees for upstarts. The Independent quoted a Democratic official to continue to push its free-market frame:

Rep. Matt Bradford, D-Montgomery, said he was concerned about the seemingly arbitrary way the licenses fees were set. He said it seemed to undermine the concept of a free-market system. “If this is truly about a free-market system that values the private market as the most efficient way to allocate resources, it would seem that is the way licenses should be doled out, not in an arbitrary manner where we seem to pick and choose between winners and losers based on favored status,” Bradford said.

Finally, in a second Mach 21 article, the Independent exposed the number of campaign dollars given to both Democrats and Republicans from the beer industry and the labor unions representing the state stores. The result is a story that implies that the opinions of the politicians are simply being bought.

Overall, these exemplars show a strong suspicion of government and a fierce protection of the free-market, both ideologies that would traditionally land to the right of center on the political spectrum.

Texas Tribune

Taken as a whole, the results of the textual analysis of Texas Tribune content suggest that the site's ideology trends slightly toward progressivism, which in some cases might be perceived as politically liberal values. However, that did not come at the expense of an attempt to remain objective. Compared to the other non-profit news sites in this study, the Tribune's content was the most straightforward and neutral on a macro scale. It could be described as a hybrid between traditional objectivity and a sometimes-literary style. The literary style created more informal, loose narratives, which in turn yielded more author interpretation and value assessments from the editorial staff. However, the authors did display an attempt at fairness. In its catering to objectivity, the Tribune often relied on official sources but quoted and exposed both Democrats and Republicans rather equally. It also presented conflicting possibilities just as evenly. While a few stories diverted from this pattern on a micro scale, they tended to even out, ideologically speaking, evaluated overall.

Similar to MinnPost, one writer's content often appeared more editorial-like than the coverage coming from other writers. These articles, written by the Tribune's executive director, were not labeled as commentary and therefore were included in the analysis due to their presentation as straight news. No indication would have alerted a reader to the notion that the ensuing content would potentially be more ideologically laden. Unlike MinnPost, however, the ideology from this writer trended toward a suspicion of a secretive government and made a call for transparency and ethical political dealings, but his content was not necessarily politically slanted stance.

Evidentially, the articles often provided comprehensive background information that was more evenly distributed throughout the story. This seemed to translate into less

of a focus on political conflict and more of a focus on issue-based reporting. Source wise, the Tribune sought information primarily from officials and high-ranking sources, but rarely obtained comment from the executive branch. The governor appeared often as a referent, but only a few times as a source and even then only through secondary mediums such as news reports and written statements. The Tribune also appeared to limit its reliance on vague groupings, which created a more authentic feel regarding the viewpoints and evidence it presented.

Some of these broad results are reflected in the Tribune's dimensions of context. Functionally, the Tribune has ambition to "build the next great public media brand in the United States" and attempts to accomplish this goal through the promotion of discussion on public policy and civic issues in Texas ("About Texas Tribune," n. d., para. 1). The Tribune claims to be a nonpartisan media entity. It has built a content partnership with KUT News in Austin, Texas — a National Public Radio-affiliated news organization ("About KUT News," n. d.). The Tribune specifically notes that while it covers campaigns, it focuses "less on the candidates than the issues" ("About Texas Tribune," n. d., para. 3). It makes reference to "distribution partners," and says its content is provided to these organizations for free ("About Texas Tribune," n. d., para. 3). Beyond naming partnerships with the *New York Times* and KUT News, the Tribune claims to collaborate with "27 daily newspapers and 11 television stations" in Texas ("About Texas Tribune," n. d., para. 4).

Contextually, the site's function and purpose is reflective of the traditional press. It has a large staff of editors and reporters that have helped win the site two Edward R. Murrow reporting awards ("About Texas Tribune," n. d.). Thirteen authors contributed

content to the Tribune during the timeframe sampled. However, the professional roles of these contributors are diverse as illustrated by biographical information provided on the site. Three authors were high-ranking individuals in the editorial chain. The executive director and co-founder of the site worked in government for 28 months as an “associate deputy comptroller for policy” and worked as a mainstream journalist for 17 years prior to that experience (“About Ross Ramsey,” n. d.). A managing editor and a news editor — both former mainstream reporters — also provided content. Two staff reporters had contributed to mainstream news outlets before joining the Tribune — one for newspapers and one for radio — and a third had written primarily for an online-only newspaper. One contributor joined the organization as a Web application developer, and another was hired after interning for the site out of college. The final five authors were not listed on the Tribune site but could be found on the KUT News site. One of those five was identified as a Tribune reporter, while the other four had no biographical information available.

The Tribune is extremely transparent about funding, which can help in an analysis of the affiliation dimension of context. First, on its “About us” page, the Tribune provides downloadable audits and financial reports that spell out its line-by-line budget. Additionally, at the base of each story, the Tribune includes a disclaimer that reads: “Texas Tribune donors or members may be quoted or mentioned in our stories, or may be the subject of them. For a complete list of contributors, [click here](#).” Upon clicking the hyperlink, readers are taken to a page dedicated to the naming of donors. In 2013, the Tribune was primarily supported by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (\$1,500,000), the Ford Foundation (\$300,000), the Cynthia and George Mitchell

Foundation (\$185,000), the Lumina Foundation (\$150,000), and Paul Foster of the Hunt Family Foundation (\$100,000) (“Donors and members,” 2013). The list goes on to report the names of each donor who contributed at least \$10, though it does allow for anonymous donations. In 2013, there were 113 anonymous donations in all, however only two anonymous donations in the site’s history totaled more than \$250 — a \$50,000 donation in 2011 and a \$1,000 donation in 2013 (“Donors and members,” 2013).

Taking the Tribune’s major donors in aggregate, they appear sympathetic to journalistic, social, and progressive issues. The Knight Foundation endows organizations seeking to support democracy through “quality journalism,” according to its mission statement (“About Knight Foundation,” n. d.); the Ford Foundation supports “social justice” and is dedicated to molding society and its institutions in order to ensure that “everyone has the opportunity to achieve their full potential” (“About Ford Foundation,” n. d., para. 1); the Cynthia and George Mitchell Foundation supports “sustainable solutions for human and environmental problems” (“About Mitchell Foundation,” n. d., para. 1); the Lumina Foundation supports efforts aimed at improving higher education (“About Lumina Foundation,” n. d.); and the Hunt Family Foundation writes grants to a variety of Texas-area programs related to healthcare, education, the arts, and quality of life initiatives (“Grant application,” n. d.).

Taking the stated pursuits of its major donors and comparing them with the results of the textual analysis, it is possible to deduce that Tribune donors might help shape, or at least reflect, the ideology embedded within the Tribune content. Topically, the Tribune concentrated on stories dealing with the promotion of an open and transparent government. These stories included coverage of political fundraising, political ethics, the

reporting of campaign finances, public meetings, First Amendment protection, and state transparency ratings. The Tribune also reported heavily on the development of the state's budget. Finally, the site covered socially relevant issues such as the proposed expansion of Medicaid, abortion, and gun regulations. It was in these stories that some more politically liberal ideology emerged from latent underpinnings.

During the timeframe sampled, the Tribune was in the middle of a series covering political ethics and transparency in the statehouse, which perhaps yielded its most ideological coverage negative toward government and the status quo. A March 4 story covered the issue of charity fundraising by politicians when the legislature is in session. While noting that the practice is not illegal, the author notes that *political* fundraising during a legislative session *is* illegal. “[T]he juxtaposition is thorny,” the author writes, implying that charitable fundraising is just as ethically questionable because politically active campaign donors tend to operate the charities. Through this implication of a political agenda, the author paints the politicians as purchasable, and presumably implies that their votes might come with that purchase. The author provides examples of this fundraising occurring in Republican and Democratic camps.

The Tribune revisits this series with a more biting story on March 11 headlined: “Freshman Lawmaker Gets a Lesson in Pack Behavior.” Again, the description is negative toward government as a whole implying that politics is cutthroat and that officials form powerful cliques. The lead captures this frame: “Only the brave and the foolish go against the legislative pack — even when they are on the side of the angels.” The author uses this lead to introduce a proposal sponsored by freshman Republican Rep. Giovanni Capriglione. The representative's proposal would require lawmakers to report

any business dealings between the close relatives of officials and government entities.

The author emphasizes the ensuing criticism of the proposal but does so through Republican comment only, a strategy that strengthens the “pack” metaphor. The tone of this frame leads the reader to sympathize with the young Republican, and through the technical strategies embedded in the narrative, the author describes the official favorably and in a way that would imply the Tribune agrees with the plan. One paragraph is especially revealing as it supports Capriglione and points a cynical barb toward the cronyism within the GOP:

Capriglione, a freshman, came to Austin with what seems like an idea born in a high school civics class: Write a piece of legislation that addresses something of concern to the voters who elected you. ... You would think he had tried to outlaw pecan pie, pistols or pickups.

That article was the last of the labeled transparency and ethics series, but the Tribune covered four more topically related stories. In another “open government” story on March 4, the Tribune covered a Democratic representative’s bill that would increase campaign finance disclosure. The author presents evidence that suggests lawmaker unscrupulousness by noting the negative ramifications and suspicion that could arise from *not* requiring this disclosure. It progresses the Tribune’s frame that lawmakers must be watched over and kept honest.

The Tribune backed off its exposure of government in a straightforward piece on March 7 that detailed technological advancements and open meetings laws. The article reported on a proposal that would allow public officials to discuss government business

via publicly accessible message boards. Like the previous stories, this one is rich in background evidence and presents varying viewpoints without taking a side.

Two final stories on ethics and open government provided a rather *favorable* description of the Texas legislature. A March 11 article detailed a report from the Sunlight Foundation that rated the transparency of each of the 50 states.⁵ The report gave Texas an “A.” Then on March 19, the Tribune took up the First Amendment in a story headlined: “Bill Seeks to Protect Those Who Film Peace Officers.” A Republican senator proposed a bill that would protect individuals from being charged with “interference” or “failure to obey” a law enforcement official if the individual did nothing more than film the officer. Again, the story presented multiple viewpoints. The Republican official was quoted as saying, “[T]here has been a disturbing trend nationwide of citizens being harassed by law enforcement for filming, photographing, and recording law enforcement officers.” The author then quoted a member of a law enforcement association to provide the conflicting possibility suggesting that the safety of the officer is important to consider and that there are some potential privacy concerns regarding bystanders. However, the source concluded that “it’s a free country, and everyone can take a picture of what they want to take or make an iPhone video.”

In the Tribune’s coverage of the state budget, two key patterns emerged. First, the Tribune managed to pull its focus away from political conflict by avoiding political

⁵ Interestingly, both MinnPost and the Pennsylvania Independent picked up this story, naturally tailoring their reports toward their respective states. The Associated Press bureaus did not cover this story. This is perhaps indicative of the non-profit pursuits as government watchdogs and in some ways might corroborate their claims that they are filling that mainstream watchdog void. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for the non-profit news sites to reference reports and studies conducted by other non-profit realms, in this case the Sunlight Foundation.

finger pointing. In a March 5 story headlined, “Senate Sends \$6.6 Billion Budget Bill Back to House,” for example, the author managed this by maintaining focus on the issues through quoted viewpoints relevant to the discussion as opposed to selecting viewpoints that progressed the divisive image of politics. The top half of the story is substantive and fact laden. The story read less ideological, if not more mundane. A second pattern emerging from budgetary stories centered on unclear and limited sourcing. Much of the evidence in these stories was attributed to official sources or was unattributed — presumably gathered from the budget text, but not clearly so. In a March 13 story covering the Senate budget proposal, while the ideology appeared balanced and straightforward, the Tribune used only two direct sources.

This lack of sourcing can lead to a greater degree of news management as fewer people are controlling the information flow. This in turn allows the ideology of the sources to be emphasized by the author, either consciously or unconsciously. A column-like story on March 18, however, provided an example of shallow sourcing working in the opposite direction — as a potential tactic for the author to convey his or her ideology through evidence selection. In this article titled, “Inside the State Budget, a Shell Game,” the author used only one source in his criticism of the practice of tax diversion. The author defined tax diversion as a political practice in which officials will allocate tax money to a specific program in the budget but divert funds in excess of that budget line into programs of their choice. The author implied that officials take this action in lieu of allowing the funds for that program to roll over into the next fiscal year thereby making tax programs more truthful in practice. The author called tax diversions and other tactics “budget tricks,” a somewhat derisive term that again leaves lawmakers looking selfish.

The single official quoted in the story is a Democrat who calls for more transparency, clearly a source selection that fit the author's frame.

Once more, however, descriptions even out when viewing the content as a full body of data. A March 20 budget article described the legislature more positively as it depicted a smooth passage of the Senate budget and provided a favorable description of Republican Sen. Tommy Williams who led the budget drafting and discussion. The author accomplished this objectively in that the description emerged through news management by a Democrat in a passage that read: "Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, noted that she voted against the budget last session but chose to support the bill this session, in part because of how Williams led the process in a fair and inclusive manner."

The emphasis of bipartisanship in the previous passage was achieved through evidence selection. While seemingly a byproduct of reporting in the previous example, bipartisan emphasis was also used as a technical strategy in the Tribune's coverage of proposals to expand Medicaid. In a March 12 article, the author wrote: "Although state Republican legislators have overwhelmingly rejected Medicaid expansion 'in its current form' under the Affordable Care Act, they've begun negotiations on what Medicaid expansion would look like in Texas." This allusion to compromise shortly after describing an "overwhelming" rejection is a disclaimer that allows the Tribune to imply that even some Republicans are coming around on the contentious issue. The Tribune also selected evidence in this article that suggests Medicaid expansion could save money in the end, but the site does not elaborate upon how it arrived at that conclusion. The evidence was merely attributed to "Billy Hamilton, the state's former budget estimator and former deputy comptroller."

There are more clues to the Tribune's lean on Medicaid expansion in a March 14 article. The Tribune took up Gov. Rick Perry's stance on the issue by quoting a letter the governor wrote to the Texas congress "ahead of his Thursday speech before the Conservative Political Action Conference." By specifically noting the timing of the governor's speech, the Tribune seemed to imply that the governor was posturing to look favorable in front of the conservative group. The report followed:

In the letter, Perry reaffirms his pledge not to expand Medicaid, an important — if optional — tenet of President Obama's federal health care law. Medicaid serves the disabled and poor children; the Affordable Care Act aims to expand coverage to more impoverished adults.

The lexicon chosen by the Tribune to describe each healthcare initiative, juxtaposed against the governor's pledge to hold them down, creates a presupposition suggesting that the governor is against helping "the disabled and poor children" and "impoverished adults." The Tribune expanded only slightly on Gov. Perry's stance by quoting from the letter his assertion that Medicaid is a "broken system that doesn't work" and that more "fiscally responsible" measures need to be taken.

More potential progressive leaning at the micro level of coherence comes through in a pair of stories covering what the Tribune called an "anti-abortion" bill, the opposite of the conservative "pro-life" lexicon. A March 25 story led with the sentence, "A bill advancing through the Texas Legislature could drastically decrease the number of legal abortion facilities in the state." Two lexical elements shine through. First, the author makes an assessment of quantity using "drastic" as a descriptor, which introduces a potential negative frame into the story. Then, the author uses the word "legal" to solidify

that tone. By adding the word “legal,” the author implies — granted factually — that the bill is attacking a service the people have a right to seek, as opposed to “illegal” abortion clinics that might exist through the same implication. The author follows with the rationale of the grouped “supporters” that suggest the bill will improve safety, but counters in the following sentence with a rebuttal from “rights advocates” — a positively charged word choice — who cast the bill as a “thinly veiled effort to close 37 of the state’s 42 abortion facilities.” The remainder of story is an exposé of the conservative bill’s shortcomings, including the presentation of evidence suggesting the bill would cost patients more money in the end. It added that no patient deaths related to abortions have been reported in Texas since 2001. The author also quoted a health care professional’s testimony at a Senate committee hearing that suggested the bill would actually cause more safety issues.

Yet a March 12 story on abortion provided more balance in conflicting possibilities. The author opened with a Republican official’s viewpoint that government health plans should not cover abortions so that those who do not want to have an abortion should not have to pay for them. The author provided a dissenting viewpoint by using “opponents” of the bill as an aggregated referent to present an unattributed assertion that the bill would “unfairly exclude low-income women who might seek abortions.” The author selected a leader of an organization called “Pro-Choice Texas” to support this frame, but did not provide background on the legitimacy or pervasiveness of the organization. After providing dissent, however, the author sandwiched the story with a quote to a special interest source from Texas Right to Life, arguably a balance to the special interest group on the pro-choice side.

Finally, the Tribune reported on two gun law initiatives, one regarding conceal-carry on college campuses and the other highlighting a bill that would make it illegal to enforce a federal gun control law in Texas. Both favored a frame that would be more readily accepted by urban-dwelling liberals. The March 13 conceal-carry story headlined: “Cigarroa: ‘Less Safe’ Environment With Campus Carry,” quotes from a university chancellor’s letter to Gov. Perry pleading the case that a House committee bill legalizing conceal-carry would have a negative effect. The story included that single source only and did not present a conflicting possibility, emphasizing the anti-gun frame by default. On the same day, however, the Tribune ran a straightforward piece covering two Republican proposals that would make it a misdemeanor for police to enforce federal laws governing the use of assault weapons and high-capacity magazines. The author provided several conflicting possibilities and did not appear to lean one way or another ideologically.

Overall, some stories in the Texas Tribune do display an ideologically liberal lean. However, because the bulk of the Tribune content is ideologically neutral, that lean tends to dilute when analyzing the sample in aggregate. Under these circumstances, it is somewhat difficult to place the Tribune on a political spectrum. On the whole, it would land somewhere to the left of center, but closer to objectivity. Even so, the content is ideologically stable, much different than the ideological volatility and sensationalism displayed by its non-profit counterparts in this study.

Ideological Nature of Online Non-Profit News Site Content

In an attempt to satisfy the goals of RQ1, which asked, “What is the ideological nature of the statehouse government coverage disseminated by the online non-profit news

sites explored in this study?” the key points of the individual descriptions will be extracted to create a synthesized description of this content. Inherent to this goal, the focus here must be placed on similarities that traversed the results. There are certainly differences, particularly in the placement of each site on a spectrum of political ideology. For instance, MinnPost codes left of an objective center toward liberalism, while the Texas Tribune sits just left of objectivity. The Pennsylvania Independent, meanwhile, sits well right of center toward conservatism or libertarianism.

Broadly, the online non-profit news sites favor an emphasis on conflict and partisanship, though the degree varies. The sites also tend to favor viewpoint presentation over more substantial factual evidence. In attribution, the sites rely on official sources, but also will branch out to cull information from non-bureaucratic sources. These sources, as illustrated by the previous sections, might be selected in order to support a particular ideology. Also, each site practiced the attribution of information to vague grouped referents. Yet, when information was attributed to a specific body, it was most often attributed to a single human source in lieu of a document. Rarely were source claims vetted. In fact, the non-profits took it one step further in their utilization of secondary sources. Sometimes they crafted whole stories entirely based on facts presented in a report from another news entity.

The sites frequently utilized technical strategies that drove their content toward more literary styles and informal tone. This informal tone quite often was a vehicle for a slanted ideology. Among the most prevalent strategies were the descriptions of emotion and the use of second-person leads aimed at connecting with the reader in a personal way. Also worth noting, the sites carried a general suspicion of government overall, though the

suspicion sometimes varied depending on the party of the individual or group being discussed. Open government seemed an important topic, which suggests the sites are seeking to be watchdogs, which is supported by the claims in their context-setting self-descriptions. Authors of non-profit news sites also were not shy about conveying their own assessments of importance, emotion, and the likelihood of a particular success or failure of a measure.

Overall, the analysis suggests that online non-profit news sites can be ideologically slanted. In some cases, this might be due to the poor labeling of stories. Some stories were more commentary-like than others, and in turn were more ideologically laden. Lastly, the results of the Texas Tribune analysis suggest that online non-profit news sites, while more informal in tone, might be able to convey something close to straightforward, objective news.

A Comparative Analysis

To investigate just how these sites compare to the news content in the mainstream, it is necessary to turn to RQ2. The results of this investigation will build upon the results of RQ1 by adding to its descriptions.

For this comparative analysis, the Associated Press was chosen to serve as an analogue of the traditional press because of its pervasiveness in mainstream media. This study presumes that this pervasiveness is due in part to its perceived objectivity. In an attempt to control for potential variations that could be introduced by geographical and political differences across state lines, the study conducts this comparative analysis within each individual state. After completing this step in the comparative process, a synthesized description will be provided in an attempt to answer RQ2. Before exploring

the results of the comparison, it is first necessary to provide the context of the Associated Press through its self-descriptions.

The Associated Press describes itself as a “not-for-profit newsgathering cooperative” committed to providing “distinctive news services of the highest quality, reliability and objectivity with reports that are accurate, balanced and informed” (Christian, Jacobsen, & Minthorn, 2012, p. 486). Commonly called “the AP,” the Associated Press began this cooperative in 1846 in order to deliver news to a wider audience (Christian et al., 2012). It became a not-for-profit entity in 1900 and today calls itself “the largest and most trusted source of independent news and information” (Christian et al., 2012, p. 486).

While the Associated Press is a two-way cooperative, meaning it allows for other media outlets to submit content to its news wire, it also employs Associated Press correspondents in each of its bureaus. The Associated Press assigned at least three correspondents to each of the statehouses under study.

Minnesota Associated Press vs. MinnPost

In St. Paul, Minn., three correspondents covered statehouse news consistently for the Minnesota Associated Press bureau, and a fourth author received a single byline in the articles sampled. The textual analysis of Minnesota AP content revealed a trend toward the coverage of socially and politically charged issues as illustrated by its topic selection. Among the frequently recurring topics covered by the Minnesota AP included a bill that would legalize gay marriage in the state, the proposal to set up a health care exchange to satisfy a portion of the Affordable Care Act, legislation governing gun control and background checks, and the state budget. In its handling of these topics, the

AP at times emphasized the political conflict and partisanship existent in the legislature, but an extensive use of detailed background information tended to put this conflict in perspective as most viewpoints were embedded in context. A fair amount of evidence was attributed to officials and other human sources, but not so much that one would question the content as a product of news management, and no single “side” of an issue seemed to provide more information than another. Viewpoints also were distributed evenly between Republican and Democratic voices in the House and Senate, as well as the Democratic governor in the executive branch. Viewpoints overall came primarily from official sources. The Minnesota AP tended to balance viewpoints with conflicting possibilities presumably in an attempt to achieve objectivity. Interestingly, however, the content was not always devoid of author assessments and interpretations of certain concepts and issues. At the same time, these assessments and interpretations were generally limited to the author’s direct observation of an event or the author’s clarification through background information. Rarely were they extrinsically polarized. The structure of the Minnesota AP content was quite formulaic in its inverted pyramid style and its tone rather straightforward and emotionless.

Overall, the Minnesota AP content could be described as objective in the ritualistic sense described by Tuchman (1972), but like MinnPost, the Minnesota AP might draw accusations of harboring a liberal ideology because of its topic selection. The topics tended to deal with the protection of people, human and health rights, and equality as opposed to more fiscally focused stories such as government spending, taxes, and capitalism, or more conservative frames, such as smaller government. More than MinnPost, however, the Minnesota AP provided balanced perspectives.

Outside of topic selection, a comparison of Minnesota AP and MinnPost coverage reveals other key similarities in source selection and the use of referents. In sourcing, MinnPost and the Minnesota AP tended to favor information gathering from official sources. Their depth in sourcing was rather comparable, but the Minnesota AP tended to vary the first voice in its story as opposed to MinnPost, which often used the Democratic frame at the outset. The Minnesota AP also used the governor as a source more frequently than MinnPost, which might speak to greater access afforded the Minnesota AP through its credibility. When venturing beyond official sources, both organizations sought expert-type sources or other high-ranking voices. As for referents, both organizations quoted corporations as singular entities and utilized grouped referents as a method of conveying a multitude of voices “supporting” or “opposing” an issue when in fact that voice was quantifiably undeterminable. It should also be noted that the physical structure of the reports resembled each other in their inverted pyramid styles.

However, the ideologies that separate the organizations on the political spectrum naturally are housed in the differences. In the case of the Minnesota AP and MinnPost, the differences existed primarily in the direction and emphasis of polarization. These polarizations emerged in the use of technical strategies, the amount and weight of author assessment, and the handling of evidence and viewpoints.

MinnPost descriptions were more often polarized and most often negatively polarized, quite feasibly a byproduct of the site’s concentration on conflict, sometimes at the expense of background information and evidence depth. MinnPost content was frequently more informal in tone than the Minnesota AP. In approach, the Minnesota AP tended to maintain an even keel, while MinnPost content tiptoed a line of sensationalism

through polarized headlines and through colorful literary accounts that frequently put energy into the description of emotion, a scene, or disparity in opinion. Perhaps because of this, the authors in MinnPost stories much more frequently offered assessments — more specifically, polarized assessments — in their interpretation of evidence and viewpoints presented by their sources. Furthermore, MinnPost far more often presented viewpoints compared to the Minnesota AP reports that, while stagnant in narrative, were more substantive in context-setting background evidence. MinnPost was also more likely to use secondary sources in its reports, and in a couple of cases used only secondary information to craft an article. The Minnesota AP also made reference to secondary sourcing, but references tended to be limited to primary information, such as in the case of a same-sex marriage approval poll conducted by the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

In all, these differences suggest that MinnPost is more ideologically volatile than the Minnesota AP. On the political spectrum, MinnPost would appear further left of center than its mainstream counterpart, and might do more to create an ideologically divided conversation through its concentration on viewpoint presentation than the Minnesota AP.

To illustrate some of these key differences, it is helpful to use exemplars from topics covered by both entities. Each organization, of course, covered stories that the other did not, but those differences appear rather mundane compared to the synchronicity of their primary topics.

On March 8, both organizations covered the Senate passage of a health care exchange bill and both took the opening angle of the debate drawing long into the night, a frame likely intended to imply extensive disagreement among the parties, consistent with

both organization's concentration on conflict. The Minnesota AP gave a Republican senator the first word. The senator criticized the Democrats' exchange bill as taking a "gamble" on a health care system that he believed was already working. Meanwhile, MinnPost gave prominence to a Democratic senator who believed the exchange didn't do enough to shift away from the old system. These are two distinctly divergent openings if measuring polarization on the political spectrum. Keeping polarization in mind, both organizations went on to make references to "key differences" in the Senate bill compared to the House bill. In its analysis of key differences, the Minnesota AP highlighted proposed funding methods and a House proposal that would allow insurance companies to sell their "specific products" in the hopes that more companies will offer coverage on the exchange. Both of these differences are rather neutral politically, though the Minnesota AP notes that "some liberals" have expressed concern over the latter proposal. Meanwhile, MinnPost identified as its key difference a clause in the House bill that would disallow the coverage of abortions by any insurance company in the exchange, a factor that would be of great interest and likely cause some liberally oriented readers great consternation.

A March 13 MinnPost article on gay marriage, referenced in a previous section, illustrates how the site uses informal tone and emotional ploys to set a scene. This technical strategy often favors one side. In the article, MinnPost described a hearing on a proposal to make same-sex marriage legal as "the most emotional moment of one of the Legislature's most emotional days," and highlighted the testimony of a former Republican that regretted her "no" vote on gay marriage. The Minnesota AP, in an interesting exception to its primarily emotionless, straightforward approach, also chooses

a more anecdotal lead in its report printed March 12 on the same event: “A mother’s voice tearfully trembled as she spoke of seeing her gay son marry one day. A child plainly asked Minnesota lawmakers: ‘Which parent do I not need, my mom or my dad?’” The difference, however, is in the polarization. The Minnesota AP managed to capture two anecdotes from two opposing sides in its lead in an attempt to create an objective balance. It maintained that balance throughout the body of the article, pulling back from the emotion to provide more substantial background evidence on the argument. MinnPost, meanwhile, moved forward with the emotional narrative and handled evidence selectively, essentially debunking the viewpoints against gay marriage. This more emotional, conflict-heavy approach from MinnPost created a more sensational tone.

This also came through in MinnPost author assessments, which tended more often to be positively or negatively charged than Minnesota AP assessments. For instance, in the gun-control debate and background-check proposal, MinnPost took aim at Tony Cornish, a Republican representative, who was against the DFLers’ proposal to expand background checks. The author used a sarcastic tone to highlight the representative’s decision to bring religion into the debate. Quoting Cornish, MinnPost reported: “‘I’m a Missouri Synod Lutheran,’ Cornish said. ‘In Luke, Jesus said, ‘Sell your cloak and buy a sword.’ That Jesus was being presented as a Second Amendment guy startled everyone in the packed hearing room.” The author followed with two paragraphs examining the passage, and without specific attribution, suggested that theologians have not translated the text to be supportive of weaponry. The Minnesota AP, meanwhile, in its more ordinary March 19 story on the same debate, led with a report that Vice President Joe Biden had spoken with DFL officials about the state’s gun debate. The report went on to

describe the bill under debate in a committee chaired by DFL Rep. Michael Paymar. Cornish did not enter the Minnesota AP story until the 15th paragraph. Even then, the author did not quote the official's religious argument but did say that Cornish "likened Paymar's proposal to 'dressing up a pig.'" Overall, the Minnesota AP report did not carry the negative slant of the MinnPost report.

In keeping with the trend of literary devices, MinnPost injected a pun into the lead of a March 20 article reporting that the DFLers chose to remove a universal background check requirement from its House bill: "DFLers who seek some sort of gun legislation again were forced to reload." The Minnesota AP went straightforward again in its coverage of the same story on March 20: "House lawmakers on Tuesday night stripped universal background checks for firearms sales from their push to revise the state's gun laws." The Minnesota AP kept that even tone and provided detailed information regarding the language of the bill and the root of the disagreements that would have kept it from its passage. It followed with Republican viewpoints and then provided historical background evidence on the evolution of the gun control proposals to this point. Meanwhile, MinnPost continued to loosen up through author assessment of emotion and the use of scene description:

A room filled with a combination of supporters and opponents of gun laws was left baffled when Paymar walked to the front of the committee room, an hour and 15 minutes after the hearing was to have started. "I appreciate your patience," a weary-looking Paymar told members of the committee. Then, he turned to the crowd. "Thank you all for being here," he said. "We want to keep the discussion going." There was a pause. The room was silent.

The MinnPost article continued with a description of what it called “behind-the-scenes politicking,” a negatively charged implication aimed at lawmakers in general.

Finally, a pair of March 21 articles from MinnPost and the Minnesota AP covered the governor’s speech at a gathering in Duluth. The governor was discussing his budget plans. Both organizations took the angle of the governor trying to “sell” (Minnesota AP) or “convince residents” (MinnPost) on his tax and spending plans. Of primary interest in this story was the handling of one audience member’s comments. The man was critical of the governor’s plan and suggested that further taxing the wealthy was unfair, as they had put in their time and paid their “fair share.” MinnPost, writing its article off a secondary *Duluth News Tribune* report, called this audience member a “Tea Party activist.” The Minnesota AP, meanwhile, identified the man as the owner of a recycling business. Clearly, these two depictions are differently charged. “Tea Party” suggests that the man is on the far right of conservatism and that he is an “activist,” which has a negative tone in this particular article. The Minnesota AP’s identification of the man is less speculative.

Pennsylvania Associated Press vs. Pennsylvania Independent

The Pennsylvania Associated Press assigned three correspondents to cover the statehouse events in Harrisburg, Pa. The textual analysis of Pennsylvania AP content revealed a rather objective balance in political ideology, more central on the spectrum than perhaps any other organization under study. The Pennsylvania AP placed a heavy emphasis on political party as the authors frequently noted to which “side” a particular source belonged. It also often noted the governor’s party, which as explained at the beginning of this chapter, emerged as an indicator of party emphasis. However, the impact of this emphasis was curiously muted. The Pennsylvania AP did not excessively

or overtly emphasize political *conflict* in its reporting. The notion of partisanship came through in implication, but any polarity lay primarily with the Republican governor who was not described positively by either Pennsylvania news organization under study.

For the most part, the Pennsylvania AP focused on the presentation of evidence over viewpoints. When viewpoints were presented, they were strikingly balanced between conservative and liberal voices. Sourcing was primarily comprised of officials, and the content overall reflected a general shallowness of conflicting possibilities, but not necessarily at the expense of one side or the other.

Typically, the Pennsylvania AP focused primarily on a legislative proposal to privatize the liquor distribution system in the state. It also covered a pair of government foul ups, the first concerning an error that caused thousands of eligible citizens to be left off the state's Medicaid database, and the second concerning the Pennsylvania Turnpike Commission scandal detailed in the Pennsylvania Independent section of this study. Taken as a whole, these topics are targeted toward keeping watch over government procedures, a rather straightforward journalistic approach indicative of Tuchman's (1972) "strategic ritual" of objectivity.

In comparing the content provided by the Pennsylvania AP with that of the Pennsylvania Independent, more differences than similarities emerged. The two organizations shared characteristics in the amount of background evidence they presented, the depth of sourcing they used in reports (or lack thereof), and the negatively polarized description of the government — particularly its governor.

In their presentation of information, both organizations utilized an equal amount of background evidence that explained the details of certain issues, and there was a fair

amount of it considering the smaller size of the Pennsylvania sample compared to other states in this study. An explanation for this might be attributed to the nature of the “hot stories” emerging from the timeframe sampled. Each organization heavily covered the liquor privatization debate and the Turnpike Commission scandal. In each of these cases, the issues were complex. It is possible that the organizations felt it necessary, then, to thoroughly explain the issues. Another possible explanation might be the nature of the reports filed by each organization. Of the 22 Pennsylvania AP stories in the sample, only two were brief in length — fewer than six paragraphs. Each of the 21 Independent stories was full size, many of them lengthy, and three of them were multi-topic, background-rich week-in-review pieces. Overall, both organizations tended to place focus on evidence, though the Pennsylvania AP was more likely to divert toward empty-calorie style process stories.

As for sourcing, the organizations drew their information from a relatively equal amount of sources and presented about an equal amount of conflicting possibilities. However, the nature of these possibilities and the utilization of the information provided by these sources were quite different. The Independent more often used evidence to advance a slanted frame, while the Pennsylvania AP used it evenly and in an attempt to appear objective. Both organizations relied on official sourcing, but the Independent was more likely to reach out to sources outside of the bureaucracy.

Lastly, both the Turnpike Commission and the state’s governor, Republican Tom Corbett, were portrayed rather negatively as a whole. Both organizations frequently made reference to the governor, more so than the other organizations under study, and quite often the references were negatively polarized, either explicitly through presupposed

evidence or through implication. Quite early in the sample, the governor and his wife were exposed for accepting gifts from lobbyists, an action that was not illegal since the governor disclosed the gifts. However, the Independent suggested that this action led to him to come “under fire” from legislators. The Pennsylvania AP moved a similar story on its wire, but the story was not authored by an Associated Press writer. Yet, it is possible that the Pennsylvania AP in turn focused a more suspicious eye on the governor, which in turn also led to a low perception.

Key differences between Pennsylvania AP and Independent content emerged in a number of areas, most significantly in the topical foci, the strategic use of evidence, the amount and balance of viewpoints, the emphasis of concepts, and the use of technical strategies to establish a frame. The overall ideology of the Pennsylvania AP emerged as one of an attempted objectivity with a duty to expose corruption and to keep honest the legislators controlling programs of interest to the people. The Independent ideology was slanted toward libertarianism, particularly a mistrust of big government and the exposure of government expenditures.

Evidence of the latter emerged in the Independent topic selection. The Independent coded heavily for an emphasis on money. Outside of the “hot stories,” the Independent covered stories that implied taxpayer plight, such as a detailing of the amount of state tax credits awarded filmmakers each month, the use of public funds to carry members of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transit Authority on public buses to a funding rally, a current law that allows convicted government officials to collect state pensions, and a proposal to expand funding for the operation of a western Pennsylvania rail line. In all accounts, the Independent cited evidence strategically to imply that the

spending would be superfluous. As for smaller government, the Independent covered a story questioning a state law that restricted the ownership of certain animals. It used the docile but illegal hedgehog as its protagonist in a story that made the state look silly for restricting ownership of the animal. Finally, the Independent exposed a law that sought to expand law enforcement's ability to access a citizen's activity on the Internet.

The Pennsylvania AP covered none of these topics. Its coverage outside of the corruption and liquor privatization stories included the botched Medicaid distribution list, the proposal to expand Medicaid, state pension debt, a proposal by the Department of Health to close 60 health care centers and lay off several health care workers, a rejected lottery contract, and a pair of government resignations.⁶ As a result, the Pennsylvania AP reporting focus was overall rather narrow. It should, however, be especially noted that the Independent ignored the Medicaid roster mix-up. Medicaid, a government health care program for the poor, would not likely be a topic of interest to a more libertarian organization, especially if that story was exposing a government that failed to deliver that free support.

In looking at viewpoints, the Independent was more likely to convey the opinions of its sources or of its authors. Republicans and free-market conservatives dominated the attributed and quoted viewpoints. Meanwhile, the Pennsylvania AP evenly distributed its viewpoints between Republican and Democratic officials. It, however, was not clean of author interpretation. Generally, though, these assessments were mild, such as in the judgment of the House liquor privatization bill's viability in a March 20 story: "Krystjan

⁶ Unlike the Independent's implication that pension bonds as a solution to the pension debt crisis would be "risky" and potentially illegal, the Pennsylvania AP covered the story from the angle of the governor perusing the case law for "fine distinctions" that would allow him to cut \$12 billion from future pension payouts.

Callahan ... declined to say whether he was sure the votes for final passage were there. But the 108-91 defeat of Costa's proposal was strong evidence." It also appeared in simple analysis, such as in a March 9 story on Medicaid expansion: "Still, Corbett is under pressure to do something about health care, as more than half the nation's governors join the expansion, consider it, or look for alternatives."

Author assessments in Independent content, however, packed more slant, or appeared in a "disclaimer," the "semantic move" described by Van Dijk (1998b). Here, one statement seemingly recognizes the opposing viewpoint only to slay it with a rebuttal in the next statement. In a March 15 week-in-review article, the Independent addresses the pension debt:

In theory, the state could borrow up to about \$10 billion on the private bond market and repay that at a lower interest rate compared to what it would pay into the pension funds. But right now, state law says such maneuvers are illegal, and they bring great financial risk. Defaulting on the bonds can drive up debt even further.

The disclaimer in the first sentence acknowledges the state's plan, but the author rebuts that by citing vague "state laws." The third sentence is unsupported evidence that supports the author's rebuttal. Without attribution, the readers are left to either accept the author's information at face value or do their own research. In a March 19 story, the Independent author interprets the grand jury testimony as painting "a compelling picture of a much wider-ranging scam, with former state Sen. Vince Fumo, D-Philadelphia, and former Gov. Ed Rendell also implicated, though not named or charged." It does not provide evidence to corroborate the assessment that more people are involved than named

and suggests that the report “puts down in black-and-white what has been whispered about for years.” Overall, the Independent was coded highly for author viewpoint related to speculation without supporting evidence. The Pennsylvania AP generally did not speculate and followed judgments with supporting evidence, a component of Tuchman’s (1972) description of objectivity.

The Independent also coded highly for emphasis in headlines compared to the Pennsylvania AP. The Independent used these headlines to establish its frame, usually using keywords that would grab the eye of a reader concerned about government spending or simply would grab the eye of any reader because of the use of charged words. Some examples include from a March 25 story: “Harrisburg-to-Pittsburgh rail to carry \$3.8 million in costs annually”; from a March 6 story: “Senator puts Pittsburgh tourism agency in the crosshairs”; from a March 12 story: “Without changes, crime still pays a pension in PA”; and from a March 15 story: “PA law enforcement wants easier access to your Internet activities.” The latter example uses the second-person “your” as a technical strategy to connect with the reader and imply that law enforcement officers want to spy on you.

In further illustration of the looser, more sensationalized approach of the Independent compared to the Pennsylvania AP, headlines can be compared in the few circumstances that the organizations covered the same event. In a Turnpike scandal story on March 13, the Independent used a headline that again emphasized the taxpayer interests, reading: “AG: PA Turnpike officials, state senator conspired to misuse and steal millions of public dollars.” The Pennsylvania AP followed on March 14 with coverage of the same event and the headline: “Ex-Sen. Leader, 7 others charged in Turnpike probe.”

The Independent emphasized several misgivings in its damning headline, while the Pennsylvania AP was more refined in calling it a “probe.” On March 18, the Independent dramatized a committee meeting on a liquor bill with a narrative of a “free-market” thinker’s journey to Harrisburg and tops it with a similarly literary headline: “They came for liquor, and left with a proposal.” The Pennsylvania AP in its corroborating March 18 piece headlined its story with a straightforward: “Committee OKs overhaul of Corbett liquor bill.”

Finally, as depicted in the previous section describing Pennsylvania Independent content, the non-profit site frequently used more dramatic and more literary devices in its coverage than the Pennsylvania AP. The Independent frequently described emotion, while the Pennsylvania AP attempted to remain in the frame of straightforward fact dissemination and viewpoint reporting with attribution. Rarely did the Pennsylvania AP craft a narrative with any emotion. Instead it relied on the typical inverted pyramid style.

Overall, the Pennsylvania Independent content is more ideologically slanted than the content from the Pennsylvania AP. On the political spectrum, the Independent would land right of center, while the Pennsylvania AP would fall somewhere just left of an objective midpoint. The Independent content is more ideologically volatile than the Pennsylvania AP, and much more sensational in its approach.

Texas Associated Press vs. Texas Tribune

Primarily four Texas Associated Press bureau authors collaborated to cover statehouse politics in Austin during the timeframe sampled. A fifth author had a single byline that fit the criteria. Also worth mentioning, the content from one author occasionally included a special notation in the editor notes that explained his duties as the

“supervisory correspondent in Austin, responsible for state government and political reporting.” The special notation was unique to AP content, but the reports in which the notation appeared did not seem to be any more or less ideological than his unnoted works or the works of his counterparts. The content also did not appear to be structurally different than any other stories in the sample. Therefore, all of these articles were included.

These authors produced 51 relevant stories during the timeframe sampled — more than any other sample set — and the textual analysis of this content shows a rather high level of polarization compared to the two other Associated Press bureaus under study. The polarization was balanced between positive and negative descriptions overall, but was imbalanced in terms of ideology. The Texas AP more often portrayed liberal values positively, while painting Republicans and conservatism negatively. Of all the samples, the Texas AP content most closely mirrored components of Van Dijk’s (1998b) “ideological square,” a surprising finding considering the reputation of the Associated Press as a straightforward and objective news outlet.

Texas AP content often emphasized political conflict and party, and frequently highlighted the empty-calorie facts of the legislative process. Source wise, the Texas AP relied on official sources. These official sources tended to appear near the beginning of stories, and therefore their viewpoints were emphasized over non-bureaucratic sources. Compared to Democrats, Republicans were more frequently used as sources and more often appeared first in stories. At times, however, authors used this early presentation as a technical strategy to set up the Republican assertions for dissection or debunking.

The bulk of the evidence presented in Texas AP stories emerged from what has been classified in this study as context-setting “background” evidence. Evidence was certainly attributed and quoted to officials, but not as much as other sites, which might indicate a resistance toward news management or a prioritizing of organizational opinions and news judgment. Official comment emerged mostly in the viewpoint category and most often was directly quoted, which supports Tuchman’s (1972) notion that the “judicious” use of quotes reflects an attempt at objectivity. Texas AP authors also did not shy away from providing their viewpoints through interpretation and assertions, and while they quite often presented two “sides,” or conflicting possibilities, there were fewer occasions in which more than two possibilities were presented.

In comparing the Texas AP content to that of the Texas Tribune, some of the more common similarities emerged, such as a reliance on official sources, the use of grouped referents, and the use of an inverted pyramid style. The Texas AP also employed a fair amount of technical strategy, which gave it a periodic informal tone similar to that of the Tribune but not as literary in form. The Texas AP had a pattern of using emotional ploys to establish a desired tone and did at times use a more narrative format.

Regarding sources, both organizations quoted Republicans more than Democrats, perhaps due to the fact that Republicans hold more seats in the Legislature. Still, the Tribune’s presentation of evidence and viewpoint through these sources was generally less charged than the more stirring Texas AP accounts. Topically, the organizations rarely covered the same stories on the same day or even adjacent days. In all but two cases, the synchronicity occurred in spending-related stories such as budget talks and funding allocation, but the angles were frequently different as the Texas AP tended to focus on

political conflict, viewpoint, and “horserace” information while the Tribune often provided more substantial details of the legislation being discussed. Both organizations touched on Medicaid debates and abortion at some point in their samples, but the Texas AP made these topics its primary focus. The Tribune, meanwhile, focused much of its energy into the exposure of government secrecy.

The differences were more plentiful than the similarities. Taking the body of the Texas news organizations as a whole, both land on the liberal side of the spectrum, but the Texas AP much further so. The diversion exists in the handling of polarization. The Tribune tended to provide an ideological balance to its polarizing content, whether it came within the story or through a second story of a different tone. This is not to say the Texas AP did not attempt to employ tactics that would fall within Tuchman’s (1972) realm of objectivity, but its more frequent employment of polarization and its categorical division between liberal and conservative values created a more ideological body of work overall.

This finding emerged from the Texas AP’s use of negatively charged implications and presuppositions related to Republican and conservative initiatives and an overall tendency to expose Republicans more frequently than Democrats. The finding is key to the overall ideological comparison between the two organizations and therefore will be illustrated first.

Exemplars leading to this assessment are plentiful throughout the sample, illustrated here through an analysis of the first week alone. In a March 4 article, the Texas AP investigated the abortion issue by depicting the clergy’s push for more women’s health funding. In a presupposition, the Texas AP wrote: “The Republican-controlled

Legislature cut spending on health programs for poor women by \$73 million — about two-thirds — in 2011.” The presupposition implicates Republicans specifically, as noted by the use of “Republican-controlled” and exposes them for an action that affected woman — more precisely “poor” women. More noteworthy, the author progressed this thesis by telling the story completely through the clergy members, a societal body frequently regarded as conservative. Comment from Republican officials was not sought. The author instead practiced the tactic of selective evidence presentation and quoted the clergy members’ assertions that all women deserve affordable health care and that laws restricting access to birth control go against this. The assertion is solidified with a supporting line from the author that reads: “Conservatives oppose any funding going to programs operated by groups support [*sic*] abortion rights.”

In another story that same day, the Texas AP exposed a Republican lawmaker in a story headlined: “State senator calls himself ‘education evangelist.’” The lead introduced the Republican source first and included an author assessment that set the senator up for critique:

Dan Patrick was giving a sermon. Or at least it felt like one. “What we need is urgency now! No excuses!, [*sic*]” the leader of the state Legislature’s tea party caucus cried, shaking the table in front of him at a Texas Business Leadership Council forum this week.

The use of exclamation points, even in quotations, was a relatively rare reporting practice in the data as a whole. The Texas AP was the only Associated Press bureau to use them in its content. It used them again in a later story when quoting a Democrat. However, the difference between the usages came down to the attributive word and the supporting

imagery. In describing the Republican, the Texas AP used the word “cried” as the attributive word instead of the usual “said,” and added the description of the demonstrative table shaking, which portrayed the “tea party” Republican senator as rather aggressive, a negative frame in this passage. The story continued to describe the Republican going on a “crusade to reshape Texas classrooms in the name of ‘school choice,’” which would expand the number of charter schools in Texas. The author continued his negative critique with his own assessment stating, “But Patrick isn’t shy about blurring the line between preaching and policymaking.” The author used this barb as a technical strategy to play off of what he calls the senator’s “zealous” approach. The author gleaned this assessment from the senator’s quote:

“Someone came up and said, ‘This is like a tent-revival meeting,’” Patrick said in an interview as he left the forum. “But you do become a little bit of an education evangelist because you know this works and you know we must do all we can to make sure every student has an opportunity.”

The quote is colorful and perhaps unordinary. However, the Texas AP emphasized his use of the word “evangelist” by placing it in the headline and structuring it in such a way that it implies the senators used “education evangelist” as a self-title. The Texas AP spent the top half of the story dissecting the unusual quote and the rhetoric. The details and background of the plan were delivered lower in the story. This structure might indicate a news judgment in favor of the sensational over value-rich facts.

In a March 6 article headlined, “Texas senators mull contentious sex education bill,” the Texas AP reported on a proposal that would disallow organizations with ties to abortion providers from teaching sex education in public schools. The author noted in the

second paragraph that the bill is “tea-party backed” and says “anti-abortionists” support the bill as a way to remove Planned Parenthood from the schools. The Texas AP went on to interview organizations in support of and against abortion, which is an objective practice. However, the Texas AP used the viewpoints from the prior organizations to debunk the viewpoints of the latter, which in the end caused the article to read more like a critique of the bill than a report upon its legislative goals.

In a March 7 follow-up story on abortion, the author’s lead described a positively framed “rally” of “demonstrators” gathering at the capitol in support of Planned Parenthood, “an organization vilified by many conservatives who work inside the dome.” Rally and demonstrators in this case are positive lexical descriptors of what might in other circumstances be called a “protest.” Furthermore, the author jabs at those working “inside the dome” by emphasizing the negative vilification by the “outgroup,” in this case “conservatives.”

Another March 7 story on the topic of Medicaid led with a negative Republican frame: “Texas Republicans have made it clear they hate the idea of expanding health care for the poor under the Affordable Care Act. . . .” Indeed, Medicaid is a program for the poor, so the presupposition is not inaccurate. However, it could be argued that the structure of this opening sentence is suggesting that Republicans “hate” the idea of helping “the poor,” which is more negatively polarized than a straightforward structure.

Lastly, the Texas AP emphasized liberal values in a March 11 article regarding a gay rights demonstration at the Capitol. The opening of the story described the event as a protest, but pit the protagonist ingroup against the antagonist outgroup, describing the protest as a “day of lobbying to support civil rights bills introduced by Democratic

lawmakers,” a positively polarized description. The establishment of the antagonist followed in the next paragraph as the author wrote: “The bills stand little chance in the Republican-controlled Legislature. Gov. Rick Perry adamantly opposes gay marriage and has likened homosexuality to alcoholism.” The line served as the only attributed viewpoint from Republicans. The only directly quoted sources spoke on the positive end of gay rights.

This polarization continues throughout the sample, and compared to the Tribune’s more balanced approach, the Texas AP content is much more charged. Using a pair of cases in which the two organizations covered the same stories, it is possible to more directly compare the two organizations. In these exemplars, they took different angles to report on teach topic.

Both organizations covered happenings surrounding the state of Medicaid in Texas. On March 5, the Tribune covered the passage of a Senate supplemental spending bill that would cover Medicaid and children’s health insurance deficits. In its first three paragraphs, the Tribune opened straightforwardly: “Texas is one step closer to paying a pressing \$4.5 billion Medicaid IOU after senators unanimously passed a supplemental spending bill Tuesday.” It continued to describe the Senate bill, its provisions, and its expenditures. It avoided demonstrative descriptions of political conflict. Meanwhile, the Texas AP covered a Medicaid “protest” at the Capitol. It opened its story with a scene setter: “About 1,000 protestors marched and rode wheelchairs to the Texas Capitol on Tuesday to demand that lawmakers fully fund Medicaid and expand it to include an additional 1.5 million poor people.” The Texas AP described the protest and followed the scene into the Capitol: “After listening to speakers talk about their shared cause,

protestors and their supporters headed inside the Capitol to lobby lawmakers.” In the middle of the narrative, the story outlined facts suggesting that Texas is behind on the times, noting that “26 states have agreed to expand Medicaid, but Texas Republicans insist the program already is too expensive. . . .” Furthermore, after presenting the Republican stance through Gov. Rick Perry, the author followed with a contrary opinion from a “former Texas Medicaid director.” This would appear to be an objective play at telling both sides were it not for the overall slant of the story and the strategic selection of evidence that surrounded the argument.

On the budget front, both organizations looked at the passage of a pair of plans on March 21. The Texas AP again favored the emphasis of conflict, while the Tribune took a straightforward approach. The Tribune led with the budget passage in the House, particularly focusing on the expansion of education funding. It continued with a comparison of the House plan to the Senate plan and provided a pair of positive quotations from a Republican representative who praised the additional education funding and the work completed. It ended with a more detailed description of the Senate plan. Noteworthy to the analysis, it did not interview Democrats, but made reference to the party in aggregate, noting its wishes to have all of the education funding restored. The Texas AP, by contrast, put its main focus into the Senate version of the budget bill and led with an assessment of what it called a “relatively civil political climate as Democrats ratchet up pressure for more state spending” — two value judgments by the author, both of which emphasized political relationships. The second assertion implied the potential for conflict. It continued with the vote count and some historical background of how the

budget had been cut in 2011 and where this budget plan fit in comparison, but it failed to cover the more tangible effects the bill might have overall.

Overall, the Texas AP is much more ideologically volatile and liberally slanted than the Texas Tribune content, despite the Tribune's occasional lean toward liberalism. The difference emerged in the level of polarization and the consistent direction of that polarization. In the end, the Tribune actually appears more objective than its mainstream counterpart.

Ideological Comparison to the Mainstream Press

In the investigation of RQ2, which asked, "How does the state government coverage provided by the online non-profit news organizations in this study compare ideologically to corresponding coverage disseminated by the traditional press in the state?" the analysis of the Associated Press itself turned into an interesting component. The Associated Press is perceived to be straightforward and objective, though as Kennedy & Cameron (2007) suggested, inherently liberal values might emerge through the journalistic mission. Indeed, that seemed to be true across the Associated Press data, but the Texas AP in particular landed much further left on the political spectrum than its colleagues in Minnesota and Pennsylvania. This result, coupled with the analysis of the Texas Tribune, suggests that it is possible for a non-profit entity to be less ideologically slanted than the mainstream entity most recognized for its objectivity.

That, however, cannot be said for all non-profits. Content from the MinnPost and the Pennsylvania Independent appears much more ideologically slanted than the Associated Press content coming out of their state bureaus. In fact, there were several notable differences between the content produced by the online non-profit news sites and

the Associated Press. In general, the non-profits were discovered to be more informal in tone than their mainstream counterparts. Non-profits do more to convey emotion and use looser, literary narratives than the mainstream. Through these strategies, they attempt to connect more personally with the reader. In attribution, they rely more on viewpoint than evidence and more often go outside of officials for sourcing. The non-profits were much more likely to cite secondary sources for information and also more likely to utilize more obscure sources, such as special interest groups and think tanks. Structurally speaking, while the organizations practiced standard inverted pyramid styles, the Associated Press was more formulaic in its approach, often conveying at least two conflicting possibilities in the lead and maintaining this balance throughout. The non-profits were more likely to stack conflicting possibilities, giving one side more emphasis because of its inclusion first. Overall, this tended to produce a more ideologically slanted body of work, but that result was not universal.

Limitations and Further Implications

While care was taken to produce a quality, rigorous, and well-designed study to extract these results, certain limitations should be recognized. As with any study of ideology, human beings — each with a unique individual and social representation of the world — ultimately make the evaluations and conclusions. The researcher for this study was a mainstream newspaper journalist for more than a decade and a graduate student at a university well known for its journalism education. While an utmost effort was made to channel all interpretations through the established theoretical lenses, one cannot expect human interpretation of ideology to be absolute.

Certain elements of the methodological design might also have affected the interpretation of results based on the nature of the data. For instance, while the sampling strategy was theoretically sound for an ideological study, it yielded an imbalance in the number of articles between states and within one of the states. The Pennsylvania data set was smaller than that of Minnesota and Texas. Yet, the number of articles between the two organizations was still relatively even. One possible explanation for the less prolific production might be due to the length of Pennsylvania's legislative session. Unlike Minnesota and Texas, Pennsylvania's legislature meets for the entire calendar year, which might lead to a more gradual legislative process and therefore a less prolific output from the news sites covering the Pennsylvania statehouse. Another possible explanation, perhaps a byproduct of the first reasoning, might be the size of the staff. Only two reporters contributed content to the Pennsylvania Independent, while only three reporters wrote stories for the Pennsylvania AP. Between states, the Texas AP sample size was much larger than the Texas Tribune. The reasoning for this aberration might lie with the organization's byline policy. While the Minnesota AP and the Pennsylvania AP loaded to the wire several more articles detailing statehouse politics, these stories did not have a byline and therefore were not included. The Texas AP might simply require more stories to include bylines. Another possible explanation might be attributed to the staff size in the Texas AP bureau. Its four consistent reporters numbered more than the other two AP bureaus. Yet, the Texas Tribune had the largest staff of all and still did not match the proliferation of the Texas AP; granted the Tribune reporters might have other beats to consume their time.

Finally, the editorial policy of the news organizations might also factor into the results. Some of the articles in the data set had more of a column-like, commentary feel than other articles. Indeed, this might actually solidify a rationale of this study. These articles were not labeled opinion, and therefore a casual reader might not recognize the article as commentary. However, should the organizations do a more effective job of labeling articles heavy on viewpoint, the ultimate ideological analysis of their sites might be different.

Overall, however, this study accomplished its research goals and discovered some interesting macro-level ideological elements that emerged as a consequence of studying two different bodies of data — one mainstream and one non-profit. One of the more global elements concerns the notion of polarization. While Van Dijk (1998b) described polarization in terms of ideological slant, this study offers the possibility that polarization is more multifaceted and must be examined at both the micro and macro level before any ideological determination can be made. For instance, an article might be volatile in that it is prone to positive and negative descriptions instead of more straightforward, neutral message dissemination. However, the article might not necessarily be ideological if those negative and positive charges balance before the article is complete. Furthermore, an organization might be more prone to create articles that end with a positive or negative charge, but in the grand scheme produce an equal number of oppositely polarized articles to appear ideologically neutral overall. This analysis does, however, play into Van Dijk's (1998a) assertion that ideology is fluid and that context must be considered at all times, hence the methodological design that maintained a cohesive timeline sample.

Another interesting finding is the division of what Tuchman (1972) called “supporting evidence” in her description of objectivity. In her example, Tuchman (1972) showed how a quote can serve as supporting evidence to a statement of fact or opinion. This study suggests, however, that evidence and viewpoint must be divided and viewed as two separate concepts when investigating ideology. In many cases, authors of articles in this study used more fact-based evidence to support a factual claim, but in other cases used viewpoints disguised as fact to accomplish the same task. Viewpoints, of course, are more ideologically laden, although evidence, it was found, can be equally ideologically laden through purposeful selection.

The finding that political conflict was among the most commonly emphasized aspects for almost all news organizations under study is also important. Stories that emphasized conflict were often less informative and more polarized. Much time was spent fleshing out the “he said, she said” of the debate, and less time was given to describing the actual effect a piece of legislation might have on the public. This highlighting of conflict and partisanship might not necessarily progress the partisan divide in the United States, but it is not likely to narrow the gap, either. Such a focus does less to inform the citizens in a way that will allow them to formulate their own ideas and make their own decisions. These news organizations might believe that focusing on a complex issue is too difficult for the audience to understand, or it could be that stories of political conflict are simply more provocative and easier to turn on deadline.

Lastly, the ideology model emerging from this study helps to build on the work of ideology scholars by offering a visual representation of the concept. It shows the location at which ideologies are most vulnerable to manipulation by news organizations (new

judgment) and where content is most vulnerable to a source's news management (at the individual and group level). Targeting the concepts through which these two threads run might provide shortcuts in an investigation of an organization's ideological output.

More in line with the goals of the original research questions, the results and analysis offer only a glimpse into the realm of online non-profit news sites. The results do not fully absolve these sites from critics such as Gibbons (2012) who suggested they are out for a power grab. However, the results also do not depict the sites as a guaranteed breeding ground for ideological slant. Indeed, an analysis such as this must be approached on a case-by-case basis. The fact that the Texas Tribune was found to be less ideologically slanted, and more effectively able to convey straightforward news than the Associated Press bureau in the state, certainly gives it some legitimacy. However, there are other areas that give critics ammunition, particularly the narrative tone that the Tribune and its non-profit counterparts regularly employ. The informal tone used by these sites might be perceived as less professional and in turn less trustworthy. In some cases, this tone graduated to sensationalism, a reverting to the days of yellow journalism. The fact remains that news consumers are simply more used to mainstream news, though it is fair to make the suggestion that such news might not be any more straightforward, only more familiar. Unless online non-profit news sites can conform to this mainstream style, it might be difficult for them to truly fill the coverage void in the statehouse or break into mainstream channels.

That said, the results indeed might suggest that the online non-profit news sites are doing a better job of serving as a government watchdog. Their uniform suspicion of government and their call for transparency are certainly healthy for the democracy. The

Associated Press bureaus, in their attempt to remain objective or appealing to the wider audience, seem to continue their more widely accepted, objective approaches and reliance on official sources as described by Schudson (1978). Meanwhile, it is the non-profits that turn to the muckraking and narrative styles in an attempt to engage their readers and give them a reason to become interested in the importance of state government.

The reporting procedures of the online non-profit news sites are really not far removed from mainstream practices, perhaps because of the makeup of the staff working for these sites — primarily former mainstream journalists. While perhaps more muckraking, the sites still write in an inverted pyramid style and still rely heavily on official sources. They still tend to report more through word of mouth than through documents. They also seem to readily accept information from sources without challenge unless challenging it fits their story frame. The non-profits also more often sacrifice background evidence to convey juicier viewpoints. This study suggests that the more substantial the background evidence in an article, the less ideologically slanted the story turned out to be. In that aspect, the Associated Press scored higher, although at times its focus was placed too heavily on empty-calorie procedural facts.

By virtue of these results, one may ask a basic question: “What if online non-profit news content were injected into the mainstream as the statehouse void continues to grow?” This analysis suggests that there would be some differences, and indeed, the content might have an ideological slant. By topic selection alone, news consumers would likely take notice. This finding corroborates Van Dijk’s (1998b) suggestion that topics are among the more important factors to study when investigating ideology. It certainly appears that some sites aim to find an avenue into the mainstream. The Texas Tribune’s

partnership with mainstream news sites is one example. This goal might explain why the Tribune takes extra steps to appear more objective than its online non-profit counterparts. However, in the case of the Watchdog.org group, as illustrated by its acceptance into the *Dubuque Telegraph-Herald* (B. Cooper, 2012), being in the right place to fill a need might be the only necessary criteria.

Overall, it should be wholly noted that any objective analysis of ideology should not include a discussion of “right and wrong,” therefore it is difficult to speculate whether more statehouse news entering the mainstream would be good or bad — straightforward or ideologically slanted. The evidence expressed might be, and more often than not likely is, factual. It is the approach and presentation of these facts that inform the ideology. In order to discover the *root* of this ideology, arguably the more important factor for a news consumer choosing his or her news source, more research must be conducted into the background and operational makeup of these online non-profit news sites.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This research investigated the ideology of online non-profit news sites and offered insight into how that content might compare ideologically to stories produced by mainstream entities. The entire study was housed within the walls of three state capitols across the United States — capitols that specifically included a disparity in ideological thought due to their divisions in party representation.

Ultimately, the research concludes that online non-profit news sites indeed produce ideologically slanted content, and in many cases produce content more ideologically slanted than the mainstream Associated Press covering the same statehouses. However, these results are not universal. In the case of the comparison between the Texas Associated Press and the Texas Tribune, the results also show that it is possible for online non-profit news sites to remain relatively objective when the whole body of work is considered, and perhaps produce content that is even more objective than mainstream reports.

As the number of reporters in the statehouse continues to decline amid newspaper financial crises, it will be interesting to observe the viability of these online non-profit news sites as they attempt to fill the void. As Fenton (2011) suggested, they have a long way to go to compete with the mainstream. Yet, Shaver (2010) offered some hope, noting that starting at the ground level — local and state gaps — might be the best place to start. These online non-profit news sites are doing that. Outside of the statehouse realm, ProPublica offers one example of non-profit journalism success, and success in cooperating with the traditional press. Of the sites in this study, the Texas Tribune model

might be a format to which Shaver (2010) alluded. The Tribune's less ideological model could garner it more legitimacy and easier entrance into the mainstream information pipeline and ultimately wider acceptance.

Overall, though, the non-profit model is yet unstable. This study illustrates that the online non-profit news sites' attraction to informal, narrative tones and presentation of viewpoint over more concrete evidence only serves to progress this imbalance. At times, these elements in aggregate give online non-profit news content a sensational sheen. Topically, the non-profits seem to find niches that further their ideological agenda. These factors emerge despite the use of source pools, inverted pyramid structures, and overall reporting tactics that on the surface look no different than any straightforward objective news report one might read in the mainstream. The ideology exists in the details and the handling of the concepts explained and illustrated in this research.

Yet, these sites arguably are achieving their goals of filling the void in the statehouse, at least in the sense of remaining vigilant watchdogs of government. The online non-profit news sites in this study showed more suspicion of government than their mainstream counterparts and also did more to call for government transparency.

Meanwhile, as the mainstream entities close the doors to their statehouse bureaus, the Associated Press might need to continue to file stories that appeal to the mass audience. The Texas Associated Press, though, seems to serve as an ideological muckraker in a sea of vanilla objectivity.

This study opens the door to future research in several areas. To continue to build from the Holcomb et al. (2011) quantitative study, qualitative research into the effect a news organization's non-profit donors has on the content produced might shed more light

onto the root of the online non-profit news site agendas. Holcomb et al. (2011) suggested that a larger staff size and greater funding transparency yielded less ideological content, and there were certainly indications from this qualitative perspective that such a conclusion might be sound. However, exploring *why* an editorial staff such as that at the Tribune chooses to produce less ideological content, or *why* the staff at the Pennsylvania Independent chooses to produce more ideological content would add valuable research to an understudied area. One suggestion would be to continue this research with in-depth interviews of editorial staff members and potentially site donors who might be playing a conscious or subconscious role in influencing the content.

A study from a reader's perspective would also add a new dimension to the ideological perception of online non-profit news content. This research could investigate the perceived genesis of ideology in a message. Does it start in the interpretation of a message, or is it infused into the message by the disseminator?

Furthermore, the interesting results from the study of the Associated Press content alone, particularly the ideological findings concerning the Texas Associated Press content, suggest that an ideological analysis of the Associated Press might be due. In recounting the history of objectivity, Schudson (1978) discussed the point at which the objective philosophy was born. News entities abandoned partisan reports for more universally digestible stories, and the Associated Press made objectivity its primary approach. Perhaps, though, this approach is evolving, and perhaps the Associated Press is not as uniformly objective as journalists and readers have come to believe.

Each of these recommendations for further research might help to better inform the reader about the content they are consuming. To understand the ideology that enters

the media pipeline is to empower the news consumer with the knowledge of the goals and agendas shaping that content. While the ideology of online non-profit news sites might be prevalent, that's not to say that it needs to be considered dubious or nefarious. Ideology is intrinsic to our lives as humans, shaping our worldview and helping us find our place in our socially constructed universe. In the end, it might turn out that Stone (2011) best summed up the bottom line when he suggested, "[E]ven biased news is better than no news" (p. 257).

Appendix

Codebook

Conflicting possibility. The presentation of information that examines the original proposition from a different or opposing vantage point; the other “sides” of the story; usually transitioned to after the presentation of an idea and the word “but.”

Exemplar 1. “In return for spending \$15 billion over the next 10 years on Medicaid, Texas would get \$100 billion to provide health care to an additional 1.5 million poor people. ... But Texas Gov. Rick Perry is adamantly opposed to enrolling more people in the joint federal-state health care program for the poor and disabled” (Texas AP). Analysis: The turn word “but” in this exemplar keys the reader to a “different side” of the story.

Exemplar 2. “Dollars following the student instead of funding the institution would “undermine the system and compromise its quality,” said University of Pittsburgh Chancellor Mark Nordenberg. ... But Folmer says it is an idea that should be considered, particularly as the state budget is squeezed” (Pennsylvania Independent). Analysis: Likewise in this exemplar, the author presents a differing point of view from a conflicting source.

Description. The broad characterization of individuals, groups, issues, etc.; often materializes through the use of positively or negatively polarized language; frequently based on an implication.

Exemplar 1. “And straights and gays alike whose groundswell of interest propelled the DFL to victories in both legislative chambers are watching” (MinnPost). Analysis: Language such as “propelled” and “victories” in this passage highlight the

positive contributions of same-sex marriage proponents and Democrats in the Minnesota government.

Exemplar 2. “State Sen. Jim Ferlo’s blood, for example, is boiling over VisitPittsburgh, Allegheny County’s official tourism agency. Even though the agency doesn’t receive General Fund appropriations, he griped about the organization during a Department of Community and Economic Development budget hearing, in front of Secretary Alan Walker” (Pennsylvania Independent). Analysis: This passage paints a negative picture of Sen. Ferlo, suggesting that he is irascible as his “blood boils” and that he “griped” instead of “discussed” or “indicated.” It also sets up a polarization between the senator and Secretary Walker.

Emphasis. A concept stressed as important through prominent placement or reiteration in a text.

Exemplar 1. “The department began its review of cases in August 2011, about eight months after Corbett, a Republican, took office” (Pennsylvania AP). Analysis: Here the political party is offset causing the reader to pause and therefore recognize the party as important to the message. Political parties are often emphasized in news text using similar methods. This example is further augmented by the finding that governors’ political parties are rarely cited in stories unlike House and Senate officials.

Exemplar 2. “Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, who oversees the flow of legislation in the state Senate, assigned it SB 23, a low enough number that debating the measure will be a priority before the Legislature adjourns in May. It is likely to face stiff, bipartisan opposition” (Texas AP). Analysis: The final sentence in this paragraph not only speculates that the bill will face opposition, but specifically describes the opposition as

“bipartisan,” therefore emphasizing the idea that bipartisanship is important for this bill to succeed.

Evidence. Material, often presented as fact, used to fill in the context of a story, corroborate a viewpoint, or to support a proposition; conveyed through paraphrased attribution, direct quotes, or sometimes through unattributed background content provided by the author.

Exemplar 1. “Hilstrom’s bill is expected to include some measures from the earlier bill, such as provisions that would target so-called ‘straw purchases’ and help county attorneys crack down on illegal gun owners. Straw purchases involve an eligible person buying a weapon for someone who legally cannot” (Minnesota AP). This passage begins with a speculative interpretation, but follows with an idea that the included measures will facilitate a decline in illegal gun ownership. This idea is then supported with an evidential explanation of how the seedy “straw purchases” work.

Exemplar 2. “Tomalis also outlined Corbett’s plan to increase basic education funding by \$90 million to nearly \$5.5 billion. ... The \$90 million would be distributed according to a special formula that provides the largest shares to districts with the largest enrollments and the least wealth, in response to complaints from superintendents in the fastest-growing districts. The objective is to get more of that money ‘where the children are,’ Tomalis said” (Pennsylvania AP). The factual evidence presented here is attributed to Tomalis and, typical to straightforward news reports, a quote or comment is used as supporting evidence to the idea being discussed.

Implication. An unstated proposition; often a polarized value judgment embedded within syntax or lexicon.

Exemplar 1. “Democrats on the committee slammed Corbett’s plan to finance a \$1 billion, four-year school grant program with license fees generated by his proposal to end the state’s monopoly over liquor and wine sales and to expand the already privatized sale of beer” (Pennsylvania AP). The use of the strong verb “slammed” in this sentence implies that the Democrats are fed up with Corbett’s plan and also implies that the Democrats are combative over this issue.

Exemplar 2. “Ethics laws and practices have a lot to do with intent and with appearances. Leave intent to the lawyers, but appearances belong to politics” (Texas Tribune). This statement implies that Texas politicians are quite often, if not always, acting with a hidden agenda when appearing at various fundraising events.

Presupposition. Material presented as information that is assumed, common knowledge, or a given.

Exemplar 1. “As expected, Republican House members voted to back him” (Texas AP). This passage illustrates a presupposition that the Republican Party alliance is intractable.

Exemplar 2. “The procedural votes — it’s been clear from the beginning that DFLers would eventually pass the bill — set up conference committee negotiations where one body will likely give significant concessions to the other” (MinnPost). This passage presupposes that readers should already have the knowledge that the Democrats would pass this particular bill.

Referent. An individual or descriptive term used to reference an actor or actors in an event; separate from “source,” for the purpose of this study, in that referents do not necessarily provide information but rather are referred to, acted upon, or used as vague

groupings of individuals in order to provide veiled support for a statement or viewpoint; might be directly tied to a political party as in the case of public official referents, or tied to a political lean as in the case of “conservative” or “liberal” referents, though the decision not to cite a political party might be pertinent.

Exemplar 1. “Republicans complained that lawmakers were investing major state resources and time in an experiment” (Minnesota AP). Both “Republicans” and “lawmakers” are used here as general, vague group referents to give the impression that all Republicans complained.

Exemplar 2. “Sen. Terri Bonoff, Pelowski’s counterpart in the Senate, and Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk requested the analysis in January” (Minnesota AP). Here the public officials are referents. No information is quoted or attributed to them throughout the story. Therefore, they are not considered “sources,” but their selection as referents might be pertinent.

Source. An individual, group, document, etc., to which information is attributed; political party or political lean attached with the source is often stated or is determinable in context, though the decision not to cite a political party might be pertinent.

Exemplar 1. “Sen. Mike Folmer, R-Lebanon, chairman of the Senate Education Committee, said the Republican governor did not renew his call for charter reforms in his 2012-13 state budget plan. ...” (Pennsylvania AP). In this sentence, Folmer is an official source belonging to the Republican Party.

Exemplar 2. “The Coalition for Public Schools said the bill and other educational proposals championed by some conservative lawmakers show ‘our public schools are

under attack” (Texas AP). The advocacy group in this sentence becomes a collective, group source that is quoted as if it were an individual entity.

Technical strategy. Structural formations, literary devices, or story forms that might convey or imply an idea or ideology.

Exemplar 1. “If legislators put a proposal on the November ballot, however, the timing could be, well, political” (Texas Tribune). The pause in the sentence to include the offhanded “well” is a method of projecting a rather informal tone, perhaps utilized to convey sarcasm toward the issue or to connect with the reader on a more personal level.

Exemplar 2. “Consider it the school choice debate for higher education. If the state is going to spend taxpayer dollars — hundreds of millions of them every year — should those dollars fund the institutions of higher education or the students who are paying more every year to attend those institutions?” (Pennsylvania Independent). The lead to this story opens with a second-person, informal sentence that immediately draws the reader and his or her opinions into the story. The following sentence is a closed-ended question that implies the choice must be either/or.

Topic. Prevailing themes discussed or covered in a body of text. In aggregate, these items might speak to ideology should particular topics surface frequently.

Exemplar 1. “Texas candidates and officeholders would have to file quarterly campaign finance reports — instead of semiannual ones — under legislation filed by Rep. Chris Turner, D-Arlington, who wants to overhaul parts of the state’s financial disclosure laws” (Texas Tribune). The lead in this article clearly indicates that the topic of the story will center on candidate campaign finance disclosures. Leads often set up topical discussions.

Exemplar 2. “This year, Pennsylvania plans to spend more than \$500 million on the four so-called ‘state-related’ universities ... and another \$412 million on the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education” (Pennsylvania Independent). For the purpose of this study, topics will be reviewed on multiple levels. Here, state spending is the overlying, broad topic, while education, specifically higher education, serves as the more granular topic.

Viewpoint. A value judgment or opinion paraphrased and attributed to a source, directly quoted to a source, or unattributed and therefore conveyed by the author; might materialize as author speculation or interpretation, or might materialize through “disclaimers” — qualifying statements often followed by “but” that are used to deflect value judgments away from the viewpoint holder and onto another source.

Exemplar 1. “‘This is just a band-aid over a huge problem,’ said Jane Kay of Moms Demand Action for Gun Sense. ... ‘I’m fed up. I’m angry. We have the opportunity to do great things and this (the bill) doesn’t come close’” (MinnPost). The viewpoint in this sentence is attributed to a person other than the author, a plain folks source in this case.

Exemplar 2. “Dayton has since become much more an advocate of legalizing same-sex marriage and there’s little doubt that Thissen, in his soul, is supportive of the cause” (MinnPost). Here, the authors’ viewpoints bleed through in two parts: First the authors interpret Dayton’s position without seeking comment, and second, the authors suggest they can see inside Thissen’s “soul” to discover his true position, a wild speculation.

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