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

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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.