

OWNERSHIP EFFECTS ON CONTENT:
A CASE STUDY OF *THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR*

By

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A THESIS PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS IN MASS COMMUNICATION

UNIVERSITY OF FLORIDA

2008

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To my mother, Dorothee Custer; my fiancé Nick McGregor; and my former teacher, Nadia Ramoutar, who all nurtured my intellectual curiosity, academic interests, and sense of scholarship, making this milestone possible. Also to my father, John McAleenan—without him I would not be in this field.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the professors who dedicated so much time to ensuring that my thesis and I would succeed and survive. I thank my chair, Johanna Cleary, who oversaw this project from its early days, through to the end. I thank Amy Jo Coffey, who generously guided me through the process. I also thank Ted Spiker, who infinitely improved my writing and kept me laughing.

I thank my mother for putting up with my crankiness as I finished this project. I also thank my friends who understood and forgave my absence and unreturned phone calls while I wrote my thesis. Finally, I thank my fiancé, Nick, who helped me stick to a schedule and ensured that yes, I could finish this.

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Abstract of Thesis Presented to the Graduate School
of the University of Florida in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts in Mass Communication

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December 2008

Chair: Johanna Cleary
Major: Mass Communication

The rise of corporate newspapers has created a less diversified ownership that places high profit demands on its newspapers. This case study of *The Indianapolis Star*, owned by the Pulliam family for 50 years before its sale to Gannett in 2000, found significant changes in news content took place under Gannett. A content analysis of the newspaper before and after the sale examined one week from both 1998 and 2002, measuring the content of 1,255 news stories. Results showed a decrease in the number of stories published, with significantly fewer national and international news stories featured in the pages of *The Star*. The content of the newspaper shifted under Gannett ownership, with fewer local stories and fewer stories exemplifying journalistic or editorial aggressiveness. Under Gannett, fewer stories were published about a shrinking variety of subjects. Community announcements rose sharply, again indicating a decrease in journalistic vigor. This study showed that the corporate ownership displayed a mixed commitment to editorial quality.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1960s, newsrooms and media watchers have been abuzz about conglomerate buyouts and the ever-shrinking number of newspaper owners. With their holdings growing, newspaper giants like Gannett and News International demand increasing profits. So what does this mean for the average reader? Is diversity of voice affected by ownership? When newspapers are operated as businesses in the free marketplace, how do news media make room for the marketplace of ideas? The growing concern about the diversity of message and independence of journalism in the world of conglomeration has led some researchers to examine how the emerging ownership patterns affect media.

A quick scan of dailies across the country used to bring a wide array of news. Local stories, regionally important national or international news, and editors' picks graced the front and editorial pages of dailies. However, homogenized front and editorial pages are becoming the norm as ownership has moved from private to public, small to large (Bagdikian, 1973, 2000; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003). A paper published for readers in central Florida may increasingly feature stories written by writers in Los Angeles, Chicago, or New York. These stories are not written by in-house staffers, but instead are taken from a wire service or syndication. Art Carey, a features writer for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, worries about the state of the newspaper industry: "It is a perilous and confusing time for newspapers. The question is, how much compromising should be done to ensure their economic vitality? And at what point does that begin to destroy people's respect for the product and undermine its credibility?" (quoted in Klein, 2007, p. 29).

It is important to look at how ownership may affect the news and opinions that reach readers across the country. While media watchers and academics tend to rely on papers of record

like *The Washington Post* or *The New York Times*, most Americans who still read papers read locally. Where the information in these pages comes from plays a huge role in what news and opinions readers receive each day. Studies of conglomeration have focused mostly on financial aspects and how those pressures affect newspaper operation (Beam, 2003; Chang & Zeldes, 2002; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003; Maguire, 2005; Meyer & Wearden, 1984).

This content analysis study seeks to examine how diversity of message is affected by ownership. Using a case study approach, it examines both family and corporate ownership of *The Indianapolis Star*. By examining the direct content changes the newspaper experienced as it moved from family to corporate ownership, this study will show the effects ownership has on news content. The media serve both the economic market, fulfilling the needs of media owners, stockholders, audiences, advertisers and employees, and “public wants and needs by providing forums in which ideas and issues may be conveyed that are necessary for the maintenance of social order and progress” (Picard, 1989, p. 9). These dual roles can find themselves at odds.

A Case Study: *The Indianapolis Star*

On June 28, 2000, Gannett paid \$2.6 billion for Central Newspapers Inc (CNI), whose holdings included *The Indianapolis Star*, *The Arizona Republic* and daily newspapers in the Indiana towns of Muncie, Vincennes and Noblesville (Robertson, 2004). CNI’s stockholders received \$64 per share, twice the price the company had been trading at before the June 7, 2000 exploring-sale announcement. For *The Star*, the sale meant the end of more than half a century of Pulliam family ownership. For Gannett, it meant the acquisition of the third largest paper in their chain.

Eugene C. Pulliam founded CNI in 1934 and bought *The Star* in 1944. He was the publisher of *The Star*, in addition to the city’s evening paper, *The Indianapolis News*, until he died in 1975. After that, his son Eugene S. Pulliam left his post as managing editor at *The News*

and succeeded his father as publisher. In 1995, the staff of both Indianapolis papers merged, and in 1999, *The News* went under. The younger Pulliam thought the sale of the newspapers would never happen, given the tenets of the trust in which his father left the papers. But, the Eugene C. Pulliam Trust did allow for the sale of the newspapers if they were seriously threatened by a substantial loss of value (Robertson, 2004). And they were. In the wake of declining competition following the closing of *The News*, Gannett bought *The Star*.

The sale to Gannett marked the final step in the paper's evolution from competitive and family-owned to monopolistic and corporate. The paper's change in ownership provides a unique opportunity to study the ramifications of its change from family-run to operating as a property of the largest U.S. publicly owned newspaper chain.

Contributions of this Study

Demers, in his 1999 paper about corporate newspapers, decries critics of corporate owners, stating, "Their charges are based mainly on personal experiences or anecdotes, rather than probability surveys or comparative case studies" (p. 87). This study seeks to answer that call, to provide a comparative case study through a content analysis. What did *The Star* look like under family ownership? What did *The Star* look like under Gannett ownership? By studying the years shortly before and after the sale to Gannett, this research will offer a more conclusive insight about the effects of corporate ownership on newspapers. This study will examine a week's worth of content from two years of *The Indianapolis Star*: 1998, two years before Gannett purchased the paper, and 2002, two years after Gannett purchased the paper. Other studies have examined chain ownership, even the Gannett purchase of *The Star* (Plessinger & Criswell, 2006), but none have taken a comprehensive look at the entire newspaper and examined the content so thoroughly.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

A 2003 Pew Research Center poll surveyed people about the then-recent FCC decision to relax caps on how many newspapers and TV stations a media corporation could own in a local market. More than half of the respondents believed the FCC decision would be bad for America (Johnson, 2003). Pew director Andrew Kohut believed “the rising anxiety about the news media in the hands of huge conglomerates” is connected to the 71% of respondents who thought the news media were “often influenced by powerful people and organizations” (p. D1).

Media consolidation, as a trend, has been the subject of research and comment since the early 1960s (Bagdikian, 1967, 1973, 1977, 1983, 2000; Beam, 2003; Blanchard & Lacey, 2003; Blethen, 2001; Chang & Zeldes, 2002; Demers, 1999; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003; Hickey, 1998; Horowitz, 2005; Johnson, 2003; Maguire, 2005; Meyer & Wearden, 1984; Meyer, 2004; Morton, 2003; Plessinger & Criswell, 2006; Shenefield, 1979; Vane, 2002). Writing for the American Bar Association in 1979, Shenefield found “some reason to hope that new, more efficient printing technologies will ease the economies of scale problem and, in the long run, lead to a rebirth of competing daily newspapers” (p. 1332). Examining the years since 1979 proves Shenefield’s hope has not been fulfilled: fewer than two dozen U.S. cities now have competing dailies. Newsprint’s shrinking ownership diversity has been subject to study across disciplines and the interest in studying this phenomenon has only grown with time (Beam, 2003; Chang & Zeldes, 2002; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003; Maguire, 2005; Meyer & Wearden, 1984).

The downfall of the privately owned paper gave way to the rise of publicly held corporate control. Because these parent companies answer to stockholders, the pressure is mounting on newspapers to ensure rising profit margins at lower costs. To be certain, private owners are in search of a profit, but corporate owners are instructed by law to provide the highest profit to the

shareholders. Blanchard and Lacy (2003) found public ownership positively correlated with higher profits and also with smaller newsroom staffs. Most papers owned by one of the larger media corporations found their newsroom staffs shrinking or at a standstill. This in turn forces the staff to rely more on wire services and syndication for content and reduces their direct involvement in the news.

Influence on Editorial Content

The pressure to increase profits also affects editorial and reporting staff. Chang and Zeldes (2002) found that public ownership increases the financial pressure on papers. Financial forces create pressure to sell more advertising, but also increase pressure on newsroom staffs to produce more for less. It is not just researchers noticing the pressure inside newsrooms. A 2004 study by the Pew Research Center found journalists are feeling the demands to perform financially. Sixty-six percent of national newsmen have come to believe that increased bottom line pressure is seriously hurting the quality of news coverage. These types of reactions from those inside the newsroom beg further research on how the bottom line pressure is affecting the quality of the news output (Meyer, 2004).

In 2003, Beam studied the content differences between newspapers with strong and weak market orientations. His study was prompted by a surge in market-driven journalism and its critics: “For a news organization, a strong market orientation implies that the newspaper, magazine or television station will aggressively seek to determine the kinds of information that readers or viewers say they want or need and will provide it” (p. 368). Beam’s findings grant merit to the argument of critics of market-driven journalism. He found that “publications with a strong market orientation publish fewer items about government and public affairs and more items about lifestyle and sports than newspapers with a weak market orientation” (p. 368). Critics worry that this catering to the market will deprive readers of the type of public-affairs

content integral to their operation as citizens and to the country's operation as a democracy. This study will examine *The Star's* content for these types of omissions and implications.

Advertising accounts for a majority of profits in most news outlets, but especially in newspapers. Vane (2002) explored advertising's potential for influence on content and the relationship between editorial and advertising departments of newspaper companies. She also discussed whether newspaper content was affected by increasing interaction between the two departments. Many editors who appear as sources in her piece spoke of a new world of journalism in which the two sides work closer together in order to reach fiduciary goals.

Profit Versus Quality

Many, though not all, publicly traded newspaper companies are known for their focus on profit over product. Papers of record like *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* are part of publicly held companies, but family control has made the financial burden lighter. Gannett, on the other hand, has "been the pacesetter, with profit margins pressing 30 percent in some of its 98 dailies" (Hickey, 2001, p. 63). The pressure to not fall below profit margins, and to continually produce higher profits, can lead to some very bad journalism. In a cost-saving effort and in tough economic times, the Florida-based All Headline News, Inc. (AHN) was sued by the Associated Press for taking portions of their stories and attributing them to AHN staff. In the lawsuit, the AP alleges that AHN tells its employees, who they claim are poorly paid, to search Web sites for news stories and then rewrite or distribute them as AHN stories (Editor & Publisher, 2008).

Few publishers have spoken out against consolidation, but Frank Blethen, publisher of the *Seattle Times*, has objected relentlessly. Blethen argues that deregulation has helped fuel consolidation, to the point where companies refer to their papers as "properties" instead of by

their names (Kunkel, 2004). Blethen again decries consolidation in his 2001 piece for *Columbia Journalism Review*:

Today, the negative consequences of public newspaper ownership, combined with media ownership concentration have become clear. Most alarming is that it is going to get worse. Our nation's newspaper and journalistic voices are less diverse, independent and bold than ever before. Democracy and public service are not well served by this trend (p. 23).

Media watchdog groups like FAIR (Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting) and MediaMatters have long railed against continued deregulation of the media industry. Only about 260 of the nation's 1,468 daily newspapers are independent of corporate ownership (Morton, 2003). Among these papers are some with owners willing to try new techniques to keep their papers out of the hands of the media giants. Employee-owned papers have been given a try, as well as non-profit holding companies. Perhaps the most popular form is modeled after the Poytner Institute, a non-profit foundation that owns the *St. Petersburg Times*. The Poytner Institute also offers a school for journalists, future journalists, and teachers of journalists.

Despite these other forms, the majority of newspapers operate under the corporate model. And it's not just in the U.S. that corporate influence has been studied as a concern. Researchers in Canada answered the call of their own media critics and explored corporate influences on newspaper content. Hackett and Uzelman (2003) found evidence to support media critics:

We have found ... that their editorial stance (ultimately determined by ownership) influences their news coverage; and that double standards or patterns of omission related to politics and class tend broadly to be consistent with what one would expect from corporate and commercial pressures (p. 342).

Their study provides impetus to researchers, including this author, to ask similar questions about the pages of U.S. newspapers.

The less information newspaper readers get, the less likely the democratic process is to function properly. The FCC held two months of public comment on media ownership rules, before it decided to revise them once again in 2007. One commissioner, Michael Copps, toured

the country on a public hearing forum about ownership rules and regulations. He spoke about media consolidation with Bill Moyers.

But [defining the public interest] is not as difficult as some of the big corporate lawyers would have you believe. It's always been defined as encouraging localism and diversity of viewpoint. Diversity of ownership too, I think. And competition. Localism, diversity, competition. We're going in exactly the opposite direction with all this consolidation we've had for the last twenty years (Moyers, 2007).

Financial pressures loom for newspapers, and as chain ownership more and more becomes the norm, the question arises: to what extent does ownership affect content? Chomsky (2006) examined internal memos between the past owner and publisher of *The New York Times*, Arthur Hays Sulzberger and editor Turner Cateledge. Chomsky's analysis shows Sulzberger frequently intervened in news decisions. More alarming was Chomsky's finding that Cateledge usually did his best to make sure the owner's requests were answered. If a paper of record like *The Times* is subject to such oversight, it seems not a far leap to imagine papers under chain ownership experience this same trend. Ownership influence is a difficult relationship to study because it relies mostly on self-reporting. Even under anonymous situations, few owners, editors or reporters would be likely to admit the level of this influence. That is why this study seeks to examine content's association with ownership. By examining content of the same parts of the same newspaper under family ownership and subsequent Gannett ownership, the bias of self-reporting will not affect the outcomes. This study will provide a clear picture of what *The Indianapolis Star* looked like before and after Gannett purchased it.

Research points to the increasingly profit-driven business of the media as one of the leading negative aspects of modern journalism (Bagdikian, 2000; Beam, 2003; Blanchard & Lacy, 2003; Coulson & Hansen, 1995; Demers, 1999; Gissler, 1997; Hackett & Uzelman, 2003; Maguire, 2005; Meyer, 2004; Morton, 2006; Moyers & Diego, 2007; Plessinger & Criswell, 2006; Plopper, 1991). Profits are mandated by a paper's ownership, so content decisions

stemmed from financial decisions are not without interference from ownership. Hickey (1998) examines anonymous testimonials from journalists across the country. The consensus, it seems, is that, “The news products that land on the newsstands, doorsteps and television screens are indeed influenced by a heightened, unseemly lust at many companies for greater profits” (p. 3). Financial institutions own stock options from newspapers, and Hickey (1998) explains the pressures modern newspapers are facing:

Those financial institutions are graded weekly, monthly, and quarterly on their own performance. So they pass that pressure along--and it's a lot--to those media companies. They in turn pressure their editors and publishers to raise their stock price by whatever means necessary. The land rush to go public in the 1980s and 1990s has had its residual effect: investors and analysts demand the kind of profits that often can be attained by mid-level papers, but are tougher for big-city dailies (p. 29).

It seems as though papers now are struggling more, especially with competition from various forms of Internet news. This increase in competition has placed an even greater financial burden on the newspaper industry. Technological advances also mean more investment and thus financial burdens shouldered by newspapers. With each month, it seems the Internet boom grows more widespread and powerful. Media convergence, once looked down on, has been embraced by professionals and added to college curriculums (Lowrey, Daniels & Becker, 2005). To keep up with the technology requires a great initial investment, often without anything close to immediate financial returns.

One tactic to combat financial pressure was recently adopted by the Tribune Company: it has gone private. Chicago investor Sam Zell bought the Tribune Co. in early 2007. Morton (2007), who wrote about the sale for *American Journalism Review* in 2007, views going private as “the best possible outcome since it will eliminate...the scrutiny of Wall Street” (p. 56). It is easy to see how not having to answer to a slew of shareholders can make long-term investments more feasible for newspapers. Rem Rieder (2006) looks forward to the outcome of *The Inquirer*

sale: “The new ownership is not only private, but also local, something highly prized by all of us public ownership bashers” (p. 6).

Bogart (1997) surveyed editors to examine what newspaper quality meant. He found three measures of quality: a high ratio of staff-written to wire service and feature copy, the total amount of non-advertising or editorial content in a newspaper, and a high ratio of news interpretation and backgrounders to spot news reports. Further, Lacy and Thorson (2004) found:

The types of newsroom changes that correlate well with circulation increases include greater investment in larger newsroom staffs, more and improved local coverage and more and better in-depth reporting. These all require monetary investment and fit with the financial commitment approach (p. 36-37).

Both show what is needed to increase news quality and circulation for papers. It is comforting to see circulation and financial success correlate well with high quality. It is disheartening to observe quality being pushed to the side in the name of financial gain, when Lacy and Thorson showed that financial gain can be reached, by means of circulation, through increased quality. But, as with technology, quality investments pay out in the long term, and are often not foreseeable in the short-term vision of shareholders.

Content Quality and Ownership

Morton (1998) examined the dichotomous relationship newspapers place themselves in when trying to achieve high profits and high quality. Citing editors and managers of renowned newspapers participating in a panel discussion, Morton notes that although most involved espouse maintaining a separation between the business and news departments, all admit the quest for high profits crosses that wall. One of the relationships this study seeks to understand is whether this profit pressure, mostly present in large corporations, affects content choices.

Some of the first research to explore this question was done by Meyer and Wearden (1984). They explored the then-new trend of public ownership of newspapers. They found

nothing to indicate that publishers, editors or staff at publicly owned newspapers were more likely to have short-term orientation than those at privately owned newspapers. Though their results might be skewed since they relied on self-reporting through surveys, they did note the need for future research on this relatively new area of study: “We therefore sound the call for further research with more urgency than is usual. The effects of investor influence may manifest themselves in subtle ways or in unexpected places” (p. 576). Their call, though long ago, still begs to be answered through a comparative case study.

Knight-Ridder, one of the nation’s largest newspaper ownership conglomerates, found itself in a sticky financial situation in early 2006. Because it was publicly owned, the majority stockholders told the board they had to sell to make up for falling stock prices (Layton, 2005). Media giant McClatchy paid \$4.1 billion dollars to acquire Knight Ridder. The deal, finalized on June 27, 2006, involved McClatchy selling 12 of Knight Ridder’s newspapers to eight different buyers for \$2.1 billion in a move to decrease their debt created by the sale (Liedtke, 2006).

Morton (2006) examined Knight-Ridder’s demise and sale for the *American Journalism Review*. He posits Knight-Ridder would have fared better had it not been a publicly traded company. Morton recalls that during the most recent Knight Ridder board chairmanship, beginning in 1995, newspaper staffs were not cut and high journalistic standards were maintained at most of the group’s newspapers. But despite sticking to standards, the company’s stockholders say their profits were dwindling and induced a sell-off. Publicly traded companies, including ones like Gannett and McClatchy who own many newspapers, are certainly more subject to the financial pressures of market forces than those papers held privately. Time and time again these pressures affect the journalistic function of the papers involved. U.S. law mandates that corporations, like Gannett and McClatchy, operate their business with their

shareholders' best financial interests in mind. These financial pressures are often at odds with the norms of journalism.

Maguire (2005) studied the ownership shifts of the *Oshkosh Northwestern* in Wisconsin. It was a successful paper for most of the 20th century, when it was owned by two families. When these two families sold the paper in 1998, it was subsequently bought and sold twice more before being bought by Gannett in 2000. In the years following ownership by Gannett, Maguire observed the quality of the paper decrease and also saw that the circulation fell 4% in the two years following Gannett's purchase. Maguire attributes this to "fewer reporters writing fewer local stories and generating less copy for the local section" (p. 78). One of the factors Maguire used in his study for quality was localism, the degree to which local issues were covered and had staff bylines. He found that local coverage decreased after Gannett assumed ownership. This lends validity to the question of whether ownership affects content across multiple holdings. If the *Oshkosh Northwestern* was printing fewer local stories, it was either printing more national wire stories or syndicated content or decreasing the news hole and increasing advertising space.

Plessinger and Criswell (2006) also examined the sale of *The Indianapolis Star* to Gannett. They examined several months of content from both 1998, representing the time before the sale, and 2002, representing the time after the sale. While they examined more time, 91 days, than this study, they only examined content on the front page and the state and city section's first page. They found that content changes indicated a reduced commitment to front-page coverage of national and international news, with more space given to local and regional stories. Several other studies have examined content post-Gannett sale. Plopper (1991) found, through a content analysis, that *the Arkansas Gazette* showed changes similar to those found by Plessinger and Criswell after its sale to Gannett in 1986. Local and state coverage increased while national and

international news coverage decreased. Plopper also found a rise in features and an increase in items of a graphic nature. Coulson and Hansen (1995) studied the sale of *The Louisville Courier-Journal* to Gannett. They found what they dubbed a “mixed commitment” to editorial quality, with some increase in local stories, while international news coverage remained low. They also found an increase in soft news accompanied by a decrease in hard news, and increase in wire or news service stories and a decrease in staff-written stories. This study differs these other Gannett studies by examining the newspaper as a whole, not just certain sections or pages. It seeks to add validity to the above case studies by building a body of work on Gannett ownership in order to ascertain a systemic ownership style by the nation’s largest newspaper owner.

In his book, *When MBAs Rule the Newsroom*, Underwood (1993) examined some of the pressures placed on newsroom employees by management and financial concerns. He found that editors of those newspapers have begun to behave more and more like the managers of any other corporate entity. The editors tend to base their news content on the results of readership surveys and public focus groups, filling pages with more briefs, entertainment news and visually appealing formats. Underwood found that newspapers are increasingly run by business-minded managers who have transformed the newspaper “in the name of better marketing, more attention to the bottom line, and more focus on audience interests,” (xvii). But, given the dual role of the press, this creates a maelstrom within the newsroom. There is the adage, “good business makes for bad journalism and good journalism is usually bad for business.” Can these opposing forces be reconciled?

The Theory of the Firm

The news media operate under a unique set of paradigms. On one hand, companies whose capitalist market goal is to maximize profits own most news outlets. In the case of publicly traded companies, they are legally mandated to maximize profits to their shareholders. On the

other hand, the news media also have a certain set of social and political roles ascribed to them. Their role of providing information is essential to the function of democracy.

The theory of the firm correctly assumes that the objective of companies is to maximize profit (Hoskins, McFayden & Finn, 2004). This theory begat the practical industrial organization framework (IO Model), which “poses a causal relationship between market structure, conduct, and performance. Market structure determines the conduct of firms, which in turn determines industry performance” (Hoskins, McFayden & Finn, 2004, p. 145). Newspapers function in most cities and towns as a monopoly. Given their fiduciary responsibilities, what relationship will their profit-seeking behavior have on content? What do the answers mean for audiences who rely on the news they get from these papers to make democratic decisions?

Most journalists would report that the media should strive to operate under the model of social responsibility of the press. Siebert, Peterson and Schramm’s (1956) view of the press affirms the author’s earlier statements on the press’ central role in our democracy. In writing about the social responsibility of the press, Peterson maintained the view that the press does seek to make a profit, but not at the expense of its function in a democratic process. The social responsibility of the press is a normative theory, meaning it exemplifies how the situation of the press ought to be, not how it necessarily is. It is the premise for how the U.S. modern press is supposed to operate. One of the ultimate goals of this study is to see if this separation between function and profit has been maintained in our current system of conglomerate ownership.

Meyer (2004) challenges the accepted dual model in his book *The Vanishing Newspaper: Saving Journalism in the Information Age*. He dubs his model the “influence model” which posits that newspapers are peddling societal influence, something that is not a commodity. Figuring out how to make this model work, he states, is the key to reviving the newspaper

business. Meyer tries to make sense of the new, though some might argue not so new, model of business for a newspaper. In increasingly unpredictable economic times, companies must do what it takes to maintain or gain profit. But when those companies hold the power of information in their hands, information integral to a democratic society, how is the balance between content and profit maintained? This study seeks to explore if and how content is affected by ownership.

Examining the content of a newspaper owned and operated by Gannett will provide a snapshot that can inform and lead to further research. *The Indianapolis Star* was family owned for nearly 50 years before its recent sale to Gannett. This unique situation allows this study to examine, through a case study, how the content changed under Gannett. The literature suggests the following questions:

Research Questions

- **RQ1:** Did the quantity of news coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* change under Gannett ownership?
- **RQ2:** Did the quality of news coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* change under Gannett ownership?
- **RQ3:** Did the subject matter of news coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* change under Gannett ownership?

CHAPTER 3 METHOD

The fairly recent sale of *The Indianapolis Star* helped to shape this study. Since it was sold in 2000, there is certainly ample time to examine the content before the sale to Gannett, specifically in the year 1998. Also, if there were to be content changes since the ownership change, the lag of two years is long enough for a change to take place and be evaluated using content from 2002.

This study used content analysis because it allows the inclusion of large amounts of text and allows the coders to identify the frequency of news. Holsti (1969) identifies three use categories of content analysis: to make inferences about the background of a communication, to describe and make inferences about characteristics of a communication, and/or to make inferences about the effects of a communication. Content analysis has been used in countless media studies. Riffe, Lacy and Fico (2005) define quantitative content analysis as:

The systematic and replicable examination of symbols of communication, which have been assigned numeric values according to valid measurement rules, and the analysis of relationships involving those values using statistical methods, in order to describe the communication, draw inferences about its meaning, or infer from the communication to its context, both of production and consumption (p. 20).

The present study followed the same method used by Maguire in his 2005 study of newspaper ownership and content quality. The content analysis was conducted in a one-month period during two years; one of the years examined was two years prior to the sale and the other two years after the sale. The study focused on the month of June in the years 1998 and 2002. A systemic sample was set up so that papers spanning the seven days of a week would be studied in each of the two years. Seven dates-- 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 19 and 25—were selected in the month of June for those two years. In all, 1,255 stories were coded; 747 for 1998, and 508 for 2002. The

newspapers were accessed using inter-library loans. The newspapers arrived on microfilm, and were scanned to create a digital file.

The instrument used was a modified version of the Story Analysis Form, developed by the Readership Institute, a division of the Media Management Center at Northwestern University that concentrates on actionable research, field-testing of readership-building ideas and measurement of their success, and education and training for the newspaper industry on readership-building best practices. (Lynch & Peer, 2002). The guide was developed for those researchers who want to establish a reliable measure of what news and information appear in a newspaper and in what proportions. This form was selected because it was developed and tested for use on a large-scale content analysis project. Also, Maguire (2005) used a version of this form for his content analysis of the *Oshkosh Northwestern*. The instrument was set up as online coding sheet through the online-research tool SurveyMonkey. The code sheet was set up as a multiple-choice survey. This aided in obtaining a clean data set, and because the tool prompts users to answer all questions, there were no missed or invalid variables in the coding. A paper copy of the coding instrument as a survey can be found in Appendix A.

The coding sheet was modified from the original Readership Institute form to capture data on several other interest areas, as suggested by Maguire. One change Maguire made was to incorporate a measure of journalistic aggressiveness by classifying stories as either “enterprise” or “event.” An event story was defined as one that has some kind of event (scheduled or not) as the main news hook. Examples would include official announcements, trials, hearings, government meetings, coming attractions, accidents, crimes and anniversaries or birthdays. An enterprise story was one that showed signs of originating from a journalist’s initiative. Examples

would include investigations, computer-based analyses, news leaks, trends and personality profiles.

Also per Maguire, quality measures were added to evaluate the degree to which the newspaper was fulfilling its watchdog role. Stories were placed in one of four categories: accountability stories (those that attempt to hold those in power accountable for their actions), neutral reportage (stories that describe an event or action without challenging the legitimacy of those involved or their actions), analysis (stories that provide a more nuanced view of a given topic) and promotional stories (those that celebrate achievements of one kind or another, including graduations, community events and groundbreaking).

Intercoder reliability was evaluated using Cohen's kappa. Cohen's kappa values greater than .80 are in very good agreement, and values between .60 and .80 are in good agreement (Riffe, Lacy & Fico, 2005). Fourteen percent of the data was double coded, and Cohen's kappa values for .60 or above were calculated for all variables. Cohen's kappa values for each variable can be seen in Table 1 below. A research assistant was trained to do the extra coding, with the author doing all of the original coding.

- **RQ1:** Did the quantity of news coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* change under Gannett ownership?

Quantity of stories was measured. Also, to give a more nuanced picture of quantity, the frequency of stories with a given treatment were measured along with those stories with a given geographic focus.

- **RQ2:** Did the quality of news coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* change under Gannett ownership?

Quality was measured by examining the number of stories with a local focus, stories with

staff bylines, enterprise stories and accountability stories.

- **RQ3:** Did the subject matter of news coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* change under Gannett ownership?

Subject matter was measured by themes, including politics/government/war, police/crime/courts/legal, natural disaster/accident, business/economics/personal finance, entertainment, education, ordinary people/human interest, food, community announcements, obituaries and others.

Table 2-1. Cohen's kappa values for variables

	Cohen's kappa
Story location	.931
Story origin	.658
Geographic focus	.848
Story treatment	.937
Enterprise/event	.899
Story theme	.915
Story category	.895

CHAPTER 4 RESULTS

This research found that *The Indianapolis Star* did change after its sale to Gannett. The quantity of news decreased, the quality of the news decreased on two of four measures, and the subject matter covered changed in statistically significant ways. Under Gannett, national and international news was severely decreased while regional news rose. Quality, defined through journalistic vigor and stories with an Indianapolis focus, fell. Stories promoting community events rose to the top of the news hole, replacing police/crime/courts/legal stories, which ranked number one in frequency under Pulliam family ownership. The first research question sought to examine the shifts in the quantity of news content.

RQ1: Did the Quantity of News Coverage in *The Indianapolis Star* Change under Gannett Ownership?

The overall quantity of news published in *The Indianapolis Star*, as measured by the number of individual articles, was less under Gannett ownership than when the paper was owned by the Pulliam family. For the selected dates in June 1998, representing Pulliam family ownership, a total of 747 stories were published. For the same dates in 2002, under Gannett ownership, a total of 508 stories were published in the newspaper. This shows a 31.9% decrease in the news hole under Gannett ownership.

The quantity of news stories with a given treatment was also measured, examining the tone of the article. While the general number of stories fell under Gannett ownership, the overall percent of stories within each treatment category—commentary/criticism, feature, general news, other—remained similar. In 1998, under Pulliam family ownership, stories coded as commentary/criticism constituted 19% of the news hole, features took up 20.9% of the news hole, and general news stories filled the remaining 60.1%. In 2002, under Gannett ownership, commentary/criticism constituted 20.7% of the stories published, 18.5% were features, general

news accounted for 60.6% of stories published and .2% were classified as other (a story not fitting into any of the three other treatment tones). None of the changes in story treatment proved to be statistically significant.

Examining the number of stories with a given geographic focus reveals another telling quantitative measure. Gannett decreased coverage on all but one measure of geographic focus. Regional coverage spiked, rising from 16.1% of news stories under Pulliam family ownership to 52.4 % under Gannett. Regional stories were defined as those outside Indianapolis, but within the Midwest region, including surrounding towns in Indiana and nearby towns and cities in Michigan and Ohio. Under Gannett, stories with a local focus fell from 35.7% to 28.7%; stories with an international focus fell from 7.8% to a mere 1.6%; and most notably, stories with a national focus fell from 25.3% to 7.9%. All changes in the geographic focus from Pulliam family ownership to Gannett were statistically significant.

Quantity measures reveal only one aspect of the content changes the *Star* went through after its purchase by Gannett. It is also important to measure the quality of coverage on various levels.

RQ2: Did the Quality of the News Coverage in the *Indianapolis Star* Change under Gannett Ownership?

Quality changes accompanied quantity changes in the shift of ownership from the Pulliam family to Gannett. Quality, as defined by Maguire (2005), was measured by quantifying the number of stories with a local focus, stories with staff bylines, enterprise stories, and accountability stories. There are some notable changes, as seen in Table 4-3. Under Gannett ownership, the quality of news coverage fell by two indicators, rose by one and remained constant in the last. With the change in ownership to Gannett, the number of stories with a local

focus and the number of enterprise stories both fell. The number of accountability stories remained a constant low under both family and corporate ownership.

The shift away from stories with a local focus accompanies the previously noted rise in stories with a regional focus. Under Gannett ownership, the newspaper published more stories focusing on the suburban areas and counties outside the city. As a measure of journalistic aggressiveness, the newspaper published fewer enterprise stories under Gannett ownership. The number of stories that attempted to hold those in power or powerful institutions accountable remained at a steady low under both ownership regimes. The number of staff bylines, as a percentage of total stories in the newspaper, rose under Gannett.

Quality and quantity measures highlight most of the changes the *Star* underwent following its sale to Gannett. Examining the subject matter covered by the newspaper both before and after the sale provides another glimpse at the ways in which ownership affected content.

RQ3: Did the Subject Matter of News Coverage in the *Indianapolis Star* Change under Gannett Ownership?

Analysis of the newspaper's coverage shows changes following the ownership shift. The number one topic covered under Pulliam family ownership was police/crime/courts/legal. The number one topic covered under Gannett ownership was community announcements. Also, it is significant to note that the police/crime/courts/legal coverage under Pulliam family ownership constituted 10.3% of stories and the community announcements accounted for 13.8% of stories under Gannett. All results are shown on Table 4-4.

Three of the top five coverage areas were the same under both owners: community announcements, ordinary people/human interest, and police/crime/courts/legal. Seven of the top ten coverage areas were the same with both owners, in addition to those listed previously:

business/economics/personal finance, politics-business economics, natural disaster/accident, and politics-city planning/land use.

The newspaper content was also coded for story category. Did the story embody a style of neutral reportage, promotional, analysis or accountability? Statistical significance was found within the changes of both promotional and analysis type stories, as shown in Table 6.

Table 4-6 provides a comprehensive look at the differences in *The Indianapolis Star* under Pulliam family ownership and Gannett ownership. Chi-squared were run on each variable to determine whether a statistically significant shift had taken place.

The results of this study show *The Indianapolis Star* experienced a shift in content from Pulliam family ownership to Gannett corporate ownership. Under Gannett, the overall quantity of stories fell, with national and international news falling significantly. And while there were fewer local stories at Gannett’s *Star*, regional stories spiked, constituting a majority of the stories published. Quality measures indicated Gannett’s mixed commitment to quality, with two of four indicators showing lower quality, one showing no change and one showing a quality improvement. The subject matter of the stories published in *The Star* changed in significant ways under Gannett, showing a heightened focus on promotional-style community announcements and a marked decrease in world and national affairs. These changes have implications for readers of *The Star* and media watchers concerned about corporate journalism’s effect on news content.

Table 4-1. Quantity Measures: Story Treatment

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)
Commentary/Criticism	142 (19%)	105 (20.7%)
Feature	156 (20.9%)	94 (18.5%)
General News	449 (60.1%)	308 (60.6%)
Other	0	1 (.2%)
Total	747 (100%)	508 (100%)

Table 4-2. Quantity Measures: Geographic Focus

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)	Chi-square
International	58 (7.8%)	8 (1.6%)	6.716, $df = 1, p < .0001$
National	189 (25.3%)	40 (7.9%)	6.156, $df = 1, p < .0001$
Regional	120 (16.1)	266 (52.4%)	1.871, $df = 1, p < .0001$
Local	267 (35.7%)	146 (28.7%)	6.716, $df = 1, p = .010$
None	113 (15.5%)	48 (9.4%)	8.718, $df = 1, p = .003$
Total	747 (100%)	508 (100%)	2.140, $df = 4, p < .0001$

Table 4-3. Quality Measures

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)	Chi-square
Local geo. focus	267 (35.7%)	146 (28.7%)	6.716, $df = 1, p = .010$
Staff bylines	378 (46.6%)	365 (71.9%)	5.652, $df = 1, p < .0001$
Enterprise stories	129 (17.3%)	78 (15.4%)	.805, $df = 1, p = .370$
Accountability	35 (.05%)	24 (.05%)	.001, $df = 1, p = .979$

Table 4-4. Topics Ranked by Percentage of Total Story Count

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)
1	Police/crime/courts 10.3% (n=77)	Community announcements 13.8% (n=70)
2	Business/economics 10% (n=75)	Politics-city planning 11% (n=56)
3	Community announcements 7% (n=52)	Human interest 8.7% (n=44)
4	Human interest 6.4% (n=48)	Police/crime/courts 6.7% (n=34)
5	Health/medicine 5.2% (n=39)	Business/economics 5.9% (n=30)
6	Politics-war/conflict 4.7% (n=35)	Politics-economics 4.5% (n=23)
7	Politics—city planning 4.3% (n=32)	Politics—education 4.5% (n=23)
8	Natural disaster/accident 3.9% (n=29)	Other 4.3% (n=22)
9	Politics—police/courts 3.5% (n=26)	Natural disaster/accident 3.5% (n=18)
10	Politics—economics 3.2% (n=24)	Education 3.3% (n=17)

Table 4-5. Story Categories

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)	Chi-square
Neutral reportage	377	233	2.638, $df = 1, p = .104$
Promotional	243	228	1.952, $df = 1, p < .0001$
Analysis	91	23	2.152, $df = 1, p < .0001$
Accountability	35	24	.001, $df = 1, p = .979$

Table 4-6. Cross Tabulations: Differences Between Pre- and Post-Gannett Ownership

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)	Overall Chi-square
Story location	747	508	.610
Front page	35	26	<i>df</i> = 2
Section front	175	110	<i>p</i> = .737
Other	537	372	
Story origin	747	508	3.339
Staff	378	365	<i>df</i> = 3
Wire/news service	322	2	<i>p</i> < .0001
Reader	5	38	
Unknown	42	103	
Geographic focus	747	508	2.140
Local	267	146	<i>df</i> = 4
Regional	120	266	<i>p</i> < .0001
National	189	40	
International	58	8	
None	113	48	
Story treatment	747	508	2.767
General News	449	308	<i>df</i> = 3
Feature	156	94	<i>p</i> = .429
Commentary/criticism	142	105	
Other	0	1	
Journalistic origins	747	508	.805
Enterprise	129	78	<i>df</i> = 1
Event	618	430	<i>p</i> = .370
Story category	747	508	3.379
Neutral reportage	377	233	<i>df</i> = 4
Promotional	243	228	<i>p</i> < .0001
Analysis	91	23	
Accountability	35	24	
Story theme	747	508	1.378
Automotive	1	3	<i>df</i> = 34
Business/economics	75	30	<i>p</i> < .0001
Community	52	70	
announcements			
Consumer	10	6	
Education	14	17	
Entertainment	1	0	
Ent. – books	5	2	
Ent. – celeb. news	19	1	
Ent. – fine arts	13	12	
Ent. – movies	20	2	
Ent. – pop music	17	7	
Ent. – TV	23	8	
Environment/weather	8	8	
Fashion/beauty	7	6	

	Pulliam family (1998)	Gannett (2002)	Overall Chi-square
Food	15	11	
Health/medicine	39	6	
Home/garden	15	12	
Leisure travel	7	6	
Natural disaster/acc.	29	18	
Obituaries	22	13	
Human interest	48	44	
Other	13	22	
Parenting/relations	8	7	
Police/courts/legal	77	34	
Politics/govt./war	14	5	
Politics – business	24	23	
Politics – city	32	56	
planning			
Politics – education	16	23	
Politics – elections	11	12	
Politics – other	10	12	
Politics –	26	9	
police/courts			
Politics –	35	8	
war/conflict			
Religion/spirituality	12	14	
Science/technology	25	1	

CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The Indianapolis Star underwent some significant changes in the past decade. While the Pulliam family bought its competitor, the evening paper *The Indianapolis News*, in 1948, the two papers continued to operate as competitors. The *News* competed with its morning counterpart *The Star* until it closed in 1999, a year after some staff at the two newspapers were merged. This study's examination of Pulliam family ownership looks at a year on the heels of declining competition. Although the paper was still under family ownership, it was perhaps beginning to make choices designed to make it more appealing to a buyer. In 2000, Gannett bought the paper as part of the purchase of the Pulliam-owned CNI for \$2.6 billion. Despite the changes already underway in 1998, during Pulliam family ownership, substantial shifts were still observed during the first years of Gannett's ownership tenure. The changes seen in the newspaper following its sale to Gannett were substantial. On all three measures—quantity, quality and subject matter—significant differences were noted. Under Gannett, *The Star* published fewer stories, showed less journalistic vigor and an increased portion of the shrunken news hole was dedicated to promotional community announcements.

Quantity Changes

The overall indicator for measuring quantity changes in this study, the story count for each week under both ownerships, showed a decrease in news coverage under Gannett. The data shows that under Pulliam family ownership, there were 35 front-page stories for the week studied. Under Gannett ownership, that number fell to 26. Though the decrease was not statistically significant, this decline in concrete terms shows an important part of the news hole shrinking. Gannett is known for its heavy use of graphics to accompany stories, and while it is outside the scope of this study, the decrease in front-page stories might be a symptom of that

trend. Also, the addition of an advertising strip on the bottom of the front page took away from the news hole and was criticized as an incursion of the traditional separation between advertising and editorial (Walker, 2004). The frequency of varying types of story treatment—feature, general news, commentary/criticism, other—remained fairly constant under both owners. As far as the types of stories Indianapolis readers were receiving, this did not change too much from one owner to another. Both carried a relatively similar balance of story types. The newspaper, under Gannett, published similar themes, but with fewer stories, less news. In examining the same sale as this study, Plessinger and Criswell (2006) found a decrease in the amount of stories on *The Star's* front page and city and state section fronts. Maguire (2005) also found fewer stories on a dwindling variety of themes under Gannett's ownership of the *Oshkosh Northwestern*.

Also, a push to the suburbs and more regional news coverage was observed after Gannett assumed ownership of *The Indianapolis Star*. The year studied under Pulliam family ownership shows no geographic focus taking up more than 50 percent of the news coverage, but local stories took up the highest percentage of the news hole. Under Gannett, a true majority of the news hole was dedicated to regional news. Most of these stories involved news or happenings in the surrounding counties and suburbs. Also, many stories involving labor relations in nearby Detroit were featured as regional stories, possibly stemming from Gannett's *Detroit Free Press*. This points to Gannett reaching to the suburbs and surrounding counties and focusing less on local Indianapolis stories and drastically less on international and national stories. National news stories dropped from being the second-highest block of the news hole under Pulliam to pulling in second-to-last in story counts under Gannett. Only international stories were featured less than national stories under Gannett. Other studies about Gannett ownership and *The Indianapolis Star*

in particular confirm these results (Plessinger, 2006). In their examination of *The Star* under Gannett, a 39 % decrease in national news stories was observed, a statistically significant decrease. The absence of almost any national or international news under Gannett failed to provide ample coverage to its readers. Moderate rises in local and regional news coverage together with a decline of national and international news coverage align these findings with those of Bagdikian (2000) that Gannett has a tendency to emphasize local and regional news content at the expense of national and international news content. The downside of this trend means readers of Gannett papers, including *The Indianapolis Star*, receive less important national and international news on which to base their opinions and ultimately votes in these matters. This move away from international and national news to make room for an increased focus on local and regional news is a deliberate strategy by Gannett, which Bagdikian traced back to a 1978 speech by then Gannett CEO and *USA Today* founder Al Neuharth. In that speech, Neuharth said, “Coffeyville, Kan., Muskogee, Okla., they don’t give a damn; the less they hear about Washington and New York the better they feel,” (Bagdikian, 2000, p. 82).

Quality Changes

Many of the previously mentioned quantity changes in news coverage obviously affected the quality of the newspaper. This study, using Maguire’s (2006) definition of quality, examined the frequency of stories with a local focus, staff bylines, enterprise stories and accountability stories. By these measures of quality, the study observed changes in three indicators. The number of stories with a local focus and enterprise stories both went down during Gannett’s tenure. In Plessinger and Criswell’s (2006) study of Gannett’s *Star*, they found a decrease in the deadline news coverage. By a different measure, this shows a lack of journalistic vigor and editorial aggressiveness. Maguire (2005) also observed a decrease in quality under Gannett, with local stories, staff bylines and enterprise stories decreasing. He also found a “mixed commitment” to

quality, though, since his study saw an increase in the number of accountability stories under Gannett. The number of staff bylines went up after Gannett purchased the newspaper.

Accountability stories were scarce under both ownership scenarios. These changes seem typical in Gannett newspapers, exemplifying what Coulson and Hansen (1995) labeled a “mixed commitment” to quality journalism. Maguire’s quality definitions stem from this country’s long history of watchdog journalism, typifying the quality called for in the social responsibility of the press theory. Staff bylines rose, but it appears the staff wrote more stories at the expense of journalistic initiative.

The decrease in enterprise stories is evidence for a lack of journalistic vigor, which can be at least partly explained by staff turnover. In the years following the sale to Gannett, *The Star* experienced a 12% staff turnover rate; in comparison, the national average in the same time frame was 3.6% to 7.85% (Robertson, 2004). A staff in transition combines newcomers with overworked veterans. The mixture of these two types could be seen as a reason for the decrease in journalistic vigor. A high turnover rate in journalism also means a lack of community history and understanding, leaving editors and reporters in danger of missing the true context or implications of local stories. Also, a staff without community history may lack the knowledge resources to undertake enterprising investigative stories. Under Gannett ownership, event stories outnumbered enterprise stories at a higher rate than before the sale. It is true that in most newspapers, the news follows what happens, an event. But newspapers must engage in some enterprise style reporting, whether it is investigations, profiles, computer-based analyses, news leaks or trends. Another quality indicator that fell under Gannett was the number of local stories. This is similar to other studies showing how newspapers change after a sale to Gannett (Maguire, 2005; Plessinger, 2006; Gissler, 1997).

Staff bylines increased under Gannett—but not without cost. Staff bylines were on the rise because of a near complete absence of wire/news service stories. This correlates directly with the lack of national and international news. Maguire (2005) observed a decrease in staff bylines at the *Oshkosh Northwestern* under Gannett, but Plessinger and Criswell (2006) found a 38 % increase in staff stories at *The Star* accompanied by a 41 % decrease in wire or syndicated stories, both statistically significant. Lack of wire use may have something to do with Gannett’s pursuit of profit. Shortly after Gannett purchased CNI’s holdings, including *The Star*, Gannett CEO Douglas McCorkindale announced he intended to find a way to run the paper more efficiently and to improve the profit margin of the paper by 25%, up to the 35% expected of most other Gannett dailies (Jones, 2000). Perhaps a move to raise profits here involved canceling wire subscriptions, providing an explanation for the absence of wire stories observed in this study under Gannett.

Clustering: A Newspaper Business Model

While such findings seem to confirm the profit-maximizing behaviors of public newspaper companies and the theory of the firm (Hoskins, McFayden & Finn, 2004), they also points to one of the most commonly used business models by newspaper companies today, including Gannett: clustering. Commonly owned papers are part of a newspaper cluster if they operate in adjacent markets (Martin, 2003). Clustering newspapers allows them to share some overhead costs like accounting, to pool regional coverage and sometimes may share a central copy desk (Morton, 1999). Clustering leads to a reduction in costs for newspaper companies because they can share costs with administration, production, advertising sales and newsgathering (Martin, 2003). This study confirms the theory of the firm, showing that Gannett operates its newspapers in a classic market structure, clustering, which determines their behavior. Martin (2003) found that newspapers cluster “to increase efficiency by assembling clusters of commonly-owned

newspapers in geographically adjacent markets” (p. 6). The absence of wire or news service stories can perhaps be explained by Martin’s finding that “almost three fourths of clustered newspapers reported sharing local newsgathering resources, as compared with one-third of non-clustered papers,” (p. 11). He ultimately found that clustered papers operate more efficiently than non-clustered papers. Comparing a map of the Midwest with Gannett’s newspaper holdings show a distinct cluster. Surrounding Indianapolis, Gannett owns dailies in Lafayette, Richmond, and Muncie, Indiana; Lansing and Detroit, Michigan; and Cincinnati, Chillicothe, Lancaster, Marion, Mansfield and Port Clinton, Ohio. This cluster of newspapers provides a likely answer to the decrease in national, international and local news, and the decrease in wire and news service stories accompanied by a sharp rise in staff stories. As is the case with any news media outlet, newspapers must accompany this profit-seeking behavior with their prescribed democratic duty to provide information to their readers. The rise in staff bylines, intended to predict positively for higher editorial quality, is tempered in this case by the lack of wire/news service stories, resulting in hardly any national or international news. In this case, Gannett found that the news hole didn’t need to be filled with expensive wire stories when staff from surrounding papers could provide ample content to fill the pages of *The Star*, albeit at a loss of content diversity.

Subject Matter Changes

Community announcements took up a majority of the news hole under Gannett ownership. This represents an important shift, away from hard news representing the largest portion of the news hole to promotional type announcements garnering the paper’s top spot. This finding echoes Beam’s (2003) findings that newspapers with a strong market orientation, like those owned by Gannett, published fewer stories about government and public affairs and more stories about lifestyle. Under Pulliam family ownership, the variety of themes covered was wider.

Themes were defined as the presiding subject matter in the story: business/economics/personal finance or human interest, etc. No one theme took up more than 10.3% of the stories coded under Pulliam ownership, while the highest-ranking theme under Gannett ownership, community announcements, constituted 13.8% of the stories coded. Community announcements should be tempered by hard news to resist the image of the paper as nothing more than a community newsletter, printing promotional stories. While community announcements mesh nicely with Gannett's stated goal of highlighting local news (McCorkindale, 2002), they do little to provide the type of hard news and information a citizen reader needs to operate in a democracy.

A greater variety of news story themes was found under the Pulliam family ownership as compared to those found under Gannett ownership. Though many of the same themes made it to the top ten under both owners, story themes under Gannett were concentrated highly in the top two themes. Gannett's top two story themes were community announcements and politics—city planning/land use. The rise of community announcements seems to be a symptom of both the spike in local coverage and the high rate of staff turnover. Most announcements stemmed from news releases or club newsletters, representing another measure of the decrease in editorial aggressiveness. The lack of diversity in story themes coupled with the high rate of community announcements indicates a downfall for the marketplace of ideas. Gannett ownership yielded fewer stories covering a narrower field of themes. Readers were not provided with enough hard news about important themes like politics, education and elections to count on *The Star* for the information they needed to make informed opinions and electoral decisions. In the absence of this type of information, the democratic system suffers because of an ill-informed public. This again shows that *The Star*, under Gannett ownership, failed to live up to the standards of the social responsibility of the press theory.

Although discussed earlier, this researcher did not expect to find an almost complete absence of wire or news service stories under Gannett. Most Gannett papers supplement their staff-produced local and regional stories with national and international news from the wires. But the *Star*'s sharp decrease in wire stories leaves its readers to either supplement their news reading with a national paper like *USA Today* or *The New York Times* or to be left in the dark about most national and international news. Plessinger and Criswell's (2006) study of Gannett's *Star* also showed a marked increase in the staff bylines and a sharp decrease in wire service stories. Though their study did not examine the same time periods or content as this study, their findings are significant here as a validation of this unusual trend. "The number of stories produced by writers with a *Star* byline increased 38 percent, while the number of stories relying on content from wire services decreased 41 percent, both significant at the p," (p. 13). It is outside the scope of this study and Plessinger and Criswell's to ascertain the reason for such a shift, but clustering can explain both these findings.

Accepting the theory of the firm, assuming companies aim to maximize profit, means turning a realistic lens to the media companies that dominate U.S. news. The newspaper industry's dominant market structure, clustering, is exemplified by this study. It shows a newspaper operating as part of a cluster to maximize profits by sharing in the newsgathering process. Clustering has its drawbacks, in that it "reduces the competitiveness and diversity of journalistic voices. In 22 states now, one company controls 20 percent or more of the daily newspapers operating there" (Bass, 1999, p. 12). Gannett, like other media corporations, operates under the legal mandate to provide profits to their shareholders. As the largest newspaper publisher in the U.S., Gannett owns 85 dailies, nearly 1,000 non-daily publications, 21 TV stations transmitting to 19.8 million homes, and 17 dailies in the United Kingdom,

making it the second largest regional newspaper publisher in the UK. With holdings covering such a large market share and reaching so many media consumers, Gannett should also be held to the social responsibility of the press theory, which states that although news media companies must make a profit, it should not come at the expense of the democratic process. So how does Gannett measure up? In all, it did not embody the spirit or the letter of the social responsibility of the press.

CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

This study shows that, in the case of *The Indianapolis Star*, ownership did affect content. Gannett, one of five main corporations controlling the majority of the news media in the U.S. (Bagdikian, 2000), published fewer stories of less quality within a narrowing scope of themes than did its predecessor. Gannett owns 85 daily newspapers in the U.S. If its ownership style produces these kinds of results, it has serious implications for media consumers. A news corporation as large as Gannett helps set the agenda for what becomes news. When whole portions of news, national and international, are left off the pages of a state's largest newspaper, where are readers supposed to find the information they need to make informed choices and opinions about the world around them? How skewed will their view of reality be if they are missing key components of national and international news? Democracy is ill served by newspapers that offer less information in both concrete terms and diversity. Corporate ownership does not serve the public—it offers up newspapers that fail to meet the demands of its readers for information in an increasingly complex world. Meyer (2004) reminds newspaper owners that their papers peddle societal influence, which is not a commodity.

Like other corporations, Gannett operates under the theory of the firm, aiming to maximize profits. In fact, U.S. corporate law requires publicly traded corporations to bring in the best profits possible for their shareholders. Following Gannett's purchase of *The Star*, Gannett CEO Douglas McCorkindale announced his goal to improve the profit margin of the paper by 25%, up to 35%, a more typical profit margin for Gannett's dailies. These profit goals were part of an overall push to improve the efficiency of the paper. By clustering newspapers in the Midwest, Gannett was able to use stories from adjoining communities and regions to fill out the news hole at *The Star*.

Along with other newspaper companies, Gannett has found clustering to be an efficient and profitable business model for the newspaper industry. Over the years, with a culmination in the 1990s (Bass, 1999), Gannett bought newspapers based on location in moves to enhance certain geographic clusters. The Midwest cluster, including *The Indianapolis Star*, allows the papers to operate at a lower cost by sharing news staff, information and often, publishing facilities. Martin (2003) found that clustered papers have smaller newsroom staffs that carry higher workloads than non-clustered newspapers. This means more pressure on the local staff and ostensibly less journalistic vigor. If cuts such as the ones found in this study are an indication of how Gannett reconciles its market behavior with its press responsibilities, then it is clear that at least the Indianapolis news-consumer community suffered for the sake of profits. The bottom line is affecting news output, making Siebert et. al's (1956) hope for a press that is both socially responsible and profitable an outdated ideal from a more optimistic time. The news media serve both the economic market and the marketplace of ideas, and it is high time a more equal balance was struck between the two.

Readers of *The Star* saw a sharp decrease in the amount of national and international news after Gannett assumed control of the paper. It seems odd that a profit-hungry corporation like Gannett would willingly drive readers to purchase other publications to fill the gap in news, but this researcher sees no other option aside from the readers electing not to seek additional information about national and international news. Perhaps the snapshot this case study presents found Gannett in the middle of another news experiment. In 1985, Gannett launched such an experiment, later abandoned. Most of its Space-Coast area paper, *Florida Today*, was dedicated to local and regional news with the back page of the front section offering national and international briefs. The briefs, attributed to *USA Today*, were meant to lead the reader to

purchase Gannett's national newspaper (Smith, Tumlin, & Henning, 1988). It would be telling to know if the Indianapolis staff was using a similar strategy. The *Indianapolis Star* is the state's largest newspaper, the capital city's only metropolitan daily and serves as the paper of record for Indiana. Because of this, the paper has a responsibility to provide readers and citizens with full and diverse news coverage, especially in recent times, where national and international affairs lead citizens' concerns far beyond the borders of towns, cities and nations. All daily newspapers do.

Limitations to the Study

One limitation to this study is that it examined just one newspaper with one corporate owner for two brief periods of time. The results of this case study cannot be generalized to other Gannett papers or other corporate newspapers. The results might be different for another newspaper, bought by another news corporation, at another time. Another limitation to the study is the time frame. The newspaper content examined only represents one week of each year studied. Originally, the study was planned to include four years, but because of time limitations, it was shortened to two to account for the lengthy coding process. Graphic and art elements were not measured by this study, which might help to point out reasons for the apparent decrease in news hole. They could have also served as a measure for quality. Another limitation of this study is that story length was not measured. Though the results indicate that the news hole shrunk under Gannett, it is possible that although there were fewer actual stories, they still might have been longer than prior to the sale, therefore not decreasing the news hole. By examining the content alone, this study did not take into account the managerial or editorial decision-making process, leaving no answers for the many "why" questions brought up by this study's results. Were the decisions to cut the news hole and increase local and regional coverage intentional? Further research can build upon these results to present a more complete picture of the corporate

newsroom and the newspaper it produces. Also, this study uses a specific measure of quality, as laid out in a previous study by Maguire (2005). As such, this study is limited because quality is a subjective matter. Different measures of quality might yield different results. This study is also limited by a lower kappa, (.658) for story origins. While within the range identified by Riffe, Lacy and Ficco (2005), it is lower than the researcher would have liked. The lower kappa was traced back to inadequate explanation and training in how to code for this variable.

Further Research

There are many more questions left unanswered by research regarding corporate ownership and its effects on content. In the case of Gannett, how systemic is this ownership style? Are the content changes found in this study the same as those found in other studies of Gannett? Some past research suggests yes (Coulson & Hansen, 1995; Gissler, 1997; Maguire, 2005; Plessinger & Criswell, 2006; Plopper, 1991), but a more comprehensive look would provide a better picture of how Gannett ownership affects newspaper content. A meta-analysis of Gannett studies involving content would help answer this question. A meta-analysis or large-scale study would also answer the larger question of whether or not Gannett maintained the separation between news function and profit. A study combining elements of content analysis and in-depth interviews or surveys would provide a more nuanced answer to this question. Also, this study found an increase in staff bylines under Gannett, which served as an indicator of higher quality. But, this case study also showed a sharp decrease in national and international news. It is outside the scope of this study to ascertain if staff bylines always mean greater or lesser quality in terms of editorial standards. This study did not measure for story length, but further research could examine this aspect of the news content to see if the fewer stories observed here under Gannett could be explained by length.

APPENDIX A
CODING INSTRUMENT

Modified Paper Version of SurveyMonkey.com Tool Used for Coding

1. Story ID

2. Where is the story located?

- Section Front
- Front Page of Newspaper
- Other

3. What is the origin of the story?

- Wire/news service
- Staff
- Reader
- Unknown

4. What is the geographic focus of the story?

- Local
- Regional
- National
- International
- None

5. What is the treatment for the story?

- General News
- Feature
- Commentary/criticism
- Other

6. Does the story exemplify an enterprise or event?

- Enterprise
- Event

7. What is the theme of the story?

- Politics/government/war
- Politics/government/war – police/crime/courts/legal
- Politics/government/war – business/economics/personal finance

- Politics/government/war – war/international conflict
- Politics/government/war – education
- Politics/government/war – elections
- Politics/government/war – city planning/land use
- Politics/government/war – other
- Police/crime/courts/legal
- Natural disaster/accident
- Business/economics/personal finance
- Entertainment
- Entertainment – movies
- Entertainment – television
- Entertainment – pop music
- Entertainment – fine art
- Entertainment – books
- Entertainment – celebrity news
- Parenting and relationships
- Science and technology
- Health/fitness/medicine
- Education
- Automotive
- Leisure travel
- Environment/weather
- Religion/spirituality
- Ordinary people/human interest
- Home/garden/real estate
- Food
- Community announcements
- Obituaries
- Fashion beauty
- Consumer
- Other

8. What category does the story fall in?

- Accountability
- Neutral reportage
- Promotional story
- Analysis

APPENDIX B CODING GUIDE

Story ID

Newspaper Date (6 digit) – Story # (2 digit)

November 11, 2001 newspaper story 4 would be: 111101-04

Front Page

If a story starts on the front page and continues inside, it's still front page. This does not include promotion of the item on the front page (if a skybox refers to a story inside, it does not count as a front page story).

Section Front

If a story starts on the section front and continues inside, it's still a section front. This does not include promotion of the item on the section front (if a skybox refers to a story that doesn't appear on the section front, it does not count as a section front story).

Origin/Source of Story

1. Wire/News Service: stories from the AP, Reuters or any other news service. We also include stories credited to another newspaper (not the home newspaper).
2. Staff: stories with or without a byline that are identified as coming from the newspaper. Includes "special to" and correspondents of the newspaper.
3. Reader: use only on either editorial pages where readers write columns or letters to the editor, or in cases where stories are specifically identified as being written by readers.
4. Unknown: use when the source of the story is not stated.

Geographic Focus

Relative to the paper being published, determine the general focus of the story. In case of doubt, think through the following questions to clarify:

1. Is a specific locality, state, region, or nation identified in the story?
2. Is the story significantly more interesting to state, region, national or international readers?
3. Does the story seem to be tailored for people from a certain locality, region, state or nation?

By answering these questions, the geographic focus should become clear. Remember that although mention of specific geographic areas is important to note, it can sometimes be misleading. For example, there may be mention of the United Nations in New York, but that doesn't mean that it's a New York story. Similarly legislation can be passed in Washington, D.C., which deals directly with a local issue. It's important to consider what makes the story newsworthy, and, more specifically, why is it in *this* newspaper?

Treatment

The way that the story is written, not to be confused with the subject of the story.

1. **General News:** any story that emphasizes facts of a recent event. Often uses a straight news or inverted pyramid style of writing.
2. **Feature:** longer, more reflective tone; often humorous or entertaining. Can be on a serious subject but tries to tell a story rather than just regurgitate a series of facts.
3. **Commentary/Criticism:** any story that offers a first-person opinion or is a stated opinion of the newspaper, e.g. editorials, opinion or advice pieces, art, music and entertainment criticism and product advice *etc.*
4. **Other**

Enterprise or Event

An event story is defined as one that has some kind of event (scheduled or not) as the main news hook. Examples would include official announcements, trials, hearings, government meetings, coming attractions, accidents, crimes and anniversaries or birthdays.

An enterprise story is one that shows signs of originating from a journalist's initiative. Examples would include investigations, computer-based analyses, news leaks, trends and personality profiles.

Themes

Most stories are complex and therefore involve more than one theme. You need to decide which theme is most prominent. The questions to ask are: What is this story really about? What is the main point in the story? What is the central concept described in the story? To answer these questions, use the following guidelines:

1. Look at the actions or developments in the story, rather than the context in which they occur.
2. Focus on why this story is in the paper at all – usually something has to happen (a news peg) that can give you a clue on how to classify the story.
3. If you cannot decide between two themes (or more) you can resort to paragraph counting (i.e. choose the theme that has more paragraphs in the story).
4. Use headlines or section heads as clues only: a story in the Business section is more than likely to include information relating to business, but it should not necessarily be coded as “business” for theme

Example:

A story about the theft of the Oscar statues can be seen as a police/crime/courts/legal story or as an entertainment story. In this case we would select the police/crime theme because that is the main occurrence in the story; the act of theft is what the story is about. The fact that it happened in the context of entertainment (and that it possibly appeared in a section on entertainment), should not lead you to code the theme as entertainment.

Category

Accountability stories—those that attempt to hold those in power accountable for their actions.

Neutral reportage—those that describe an event or action without challenging the legitimacy of those involved or their actions.

Promotional stories—those that celebrate achievements of one kind or another, including graduations, community events and groundbreakings.

Analysis—those that provide a deeper, greater or more nuanced understanding of a news issue.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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