The Strength of State Government Reporting: How In-Depth News and Investigative Coverage by Six U.S. Newspapers Fared from 2005 Through 2014

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The existential threat faced by many of America's revered newspapers over the last decade has been well-chronicled. The sudden emergence of advertising competition from the Internet precipitated stark revenue losses, and the country's economic downturn that began in 2007 delivered a second—and for some, a fatal—blow. In a desperate attempt to stay afloat, legacy media institutions slashed budgets and laid-off thousands of reporters.

Several studies have documented these financial woes. Others have explored implications for the industry's future and possible reforms. But one critical piece of the narrative has been absent from the literature: how, if at all, the nature of news content changed during this transformational era.

This thesis aims to help fill that gap through a quantitative assessment of the health of state government reporting by six U.S. print newspapers from 2005 through 2014. Specifically, two key indicators of journalistic strength over time are measured: in-depth reporting and investigative coverage. This study posits that both indicators require well-staffed and well-supported newsrooms, making them vulnerable during tough times.

The results of this analysis, though limited to only six publications, are telling. The key findings include:

- Collectively, in-depth news coverage fell 30 percent over the time period studied, with the largest drops occurring from 2006-08. Although in-depth news coverage leveled off in the later years of the study period, it never recovered to pre-recession production levels.

- Half of the outlets in the sample experienced three or more consecutive years without any investigative coverage on state government. And, by 2014, five of the six publications had failed to produce the same number of investigative articles on state government as they did during their pre-recession peaks.
- Overall, there was a positive linear correlation between the number of news reporters a publication employed and the number of investigative articles it produced.
- When adjusted for the size of their respective state governments, outlets showed wide variation in their production of in-depth news and investigative articles.

These empirical findings support what media scholars and observers alike have suspected: the economic and financial collapse of the last decade took a toll on the overall strength of news content. More importantly, they underpin evidence to the chorus of concerns that those with power in state government are making critical choices on behalf of citizens with a weaker media watchdog holding them accountable.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The last decade was a transformational era for the news industry. The rise of advertising competition from the Internet coupled with the economic collapse from 2007-09, stripped away all that was familiar and profitable for legacy newspapers and their publishers. The consequences were, and continue to be, very real.

From 2000 to 2014, print newspaper advertising revenue—long newspaper's primary bread and butter—dropped from an all-time high of $49 billion to $16 billion, a depletion of nearly 70 percent (Sullivan, 2011, para. 8; Barthel, 2015). This void has been only partially filled by steady growth in digital ad revenue (Barthel, 2015). Beginning in 2003, aggregate daily newspaper circulation dropped for 10 consecutive years (Barthel, 2015). And although most newspaper readership continues to be in print rather than digital, the audience is an older one (Barthel, 2015). In 2014, only 20 percent of Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 read a print newspaper daily, compared to 52 percent of Americans over the age of 65 ("Newspapers: Daily Readership by Age," n.d.). These trends suggest that print readership, too, may not sustain.

In response to these financial hardships, newspapers retrenched by cutting staff and content. In fact, more than 21,000 full-time newsroom jobs—nearly 40 percent—were lost from 2005-15 ("2015 Census," 2015). More than 3,000 full-time journalists lost their jobs from 2014-15 alone—a year in which employment rose nationally and across most industries (Doctor, 2015).

These trends beg the question: How has the health of news coverage fared and, in turn, what are the implications for self-governance. In the 2011 publication, *Will the Last Reporter Please Turn Out the Lights,* Robert McChesney and Victor Pickard assembled a

series of research, articles, speeches, and more on the recent crisis in journalism. They introduce the book with an explanation of the integral role that journalism plays in American democracy:

> The basis for self-government is an informed citizenry, and as the Fourth Estate is the institution with primary responsibility for making an informed citizenry possible, the existential crisis for news media is, in fact, an existential crisis for self-government… It is impossible to conceive of effective governance and the rule of law—not to mention individual freedoms, social justice, and effective and enlightened solutions to daunting problems—without a credible system of journalism. (p. ix)

Today, with the Internet's place in the news landscape firmly established, and with the nation's economy in a more stable position, it is important to take stock of how the nation's Fourth Estate fared during this unique period. This thesis seeks to help do so by measuring indicators of strong news journalism over time, specifically coverage of state governments. While vital and valuable reporting spans subjects and issues, state capitol reporting plays an outsized role in informing the public of matters directly influencing their lives, and it has been especially harmed by the recent downturn.

The Decline in Statehouse Reporting and Why It Matters

While no news beat has emerged unscathed from the industry's turmoil, statehouse reporting has been affected more than most. State government coverage is costly, time-consuming, and legally risky—placing it in square in the sights of publishers eager to reduce costs.

Statehouse reporting has been referred to as a type of "broccoli" journalism, meaning that it produces "stories that might be both unpopular but good for you" (Waldman, 2011, p. 44). Its function is to cover key players in state government and the policies they enact; its purpose, as with all reporting of politics and policy, is keeping the public informed and the powerful in check. Statehouse reporting is also "unsexy and repetitive," (Luscombe, 2009, para. 3) as observed by TIME editor-at-large Belinda Luscombe. "Uncovering corruption, incompetence or waste takes an inordinate amount of time and effort. As newsrooms and newspapers have become smaller, coverage of state politics has been among the first to get cut" (Luscombe, 2009, para. 3).

Nonetheless, at its best, state government reporting can change lives. For example, in 2001, *The Washington Post* produced a four-part series uncovering how failures by the District of Columbia's child protection system played a role in the deaths of at least 40 boys and girls in the District (Horwitz, Hingham, & Cohen, 2001). The series prompted drastic departmental reforms and earned the paper a Pulitzer Prize (Day, 2002).

In 2015, the *Miami Herald* published an investigation on a series of ritualized inmate-on-inmate beatings and rapes at several state-run youthful offender prisons. The assaults continued for years despite the Florida Department of Correction's apparent knowledge of the inmate hazing routine (Brown, 2015). The investigation inspired one state legislator to meet with more than 120 inmates across 23 state-run correctional facilities in a quest to understand and then reform the troubled system. The head of the Florida Department of Corrections also opened investigations of guards accused of neglecting and/or abusing inmates (Klas, 2016).

As the latest crisis unfolded, newspapers increasingly redirected resources from the state government beat to hyperlocal reporting. The business case for the shift was that newspapers had a competitive advantage over online sources in providing readers with important local information (Starr, 2009, p. 27). While this may have improved the strength of local reporting, state coverage suffered.

According to media scholar Paul Starr (2009), investigative reporting is "even more critical at the state level, where no one else is likely to step in when newspapers cut back" (p. 26).

And cut back, they did. Although newspapers still account for the greatest portion of full-time statehouse reporters, their ranks have consistently declined (Enda, Matsa, & Boyles, 2014). The American Journalism Review, which conducted five analyses of newspapers' statehouse staffs between 1998 and 2009, found that the number of full-time reporters covering statehouses fell sharply, from 524 in 2003 to 355 in 2009—a 32 percent reduction in just six years, compared to a sector-wide contraction of 15 percent (Dorroh, 2009). By 2014, the count was down to 319, according to The Pew Research Center (PRC) (Enda, et al., 2014).

The alarming rise of empty desks in state capitol newsrooms has not gone unnoticed (Leccese, 2014; Peters, 2008; Sudermann, 2009). The president of a Harrisburg, PA-based think tank, for example, observed: "Our state capitol used to be bustling with the media. Now, you can swing a dead cat and not hit anybody in the state Capitol newsroom" (Waldman, 2011, para. 45). In Pennsylvania, 40 reporters were dedicated to covering the state legislature in 1987; in 2011, there were only 19 (Waldman, 2013, para. 18).

But what arguably matters more than the number of empty desks is the overall loss in years of experience from the reporters who once filled them. When newspapers across the country began downsizing, a common approach was to offer buyouts to veteran senior staff (Jacobson, 2015; Maharidge, 2016; Pearlstein, 2006; Starr, 2009, p. 27). As with most professional fields, the long-tenured reporters typically had the highest salaries. As a result of this cost-savings strategy, news institutions across the country likely lost thousands of years of journalism experience collectively.

They also lost staff whose life passions had been to "report and edit information crucially needed in a democracy" (Fehr, 2008, para. 15), as former veteran *Washington Post* reporter and editor Stephen Fehr wrote on his last day at the publication. "All I ever wanted to do was work at a newspaper," said Fehr (2008, para. 4). "I hope the historians will also write about some of the people who were swept aside by this revolution in technology. People like me" (Fehr, 2008, para. 3). After *The Washington Post* lost $77 million in print advertising revenue in 2007 alone, Fehr, along with several other *Post* staff, voluntarily accepted early retirement packages.

This loss of experience cannot be replaced easily, as it takes years to develop reliable sources and to understand the intricacies of state policy. A former *New York Times* reporter who spent years covering Albany, NY, explained:

> As news outlets fire older, more expensive reporters and replace them with young reporters, they sometimes sacrifice depth and relevant knowledge about process and policy… It takes two or three legislative sessions to begin to understand the tricks and dodges of the budget process, or where lawmakers hide pork-barrel grants. (Jacobson, 2015, para. 9)

Further, state government reporting, more so than other beats, requires a high degree of dedication and passion to remain committed to monitoring "long, complicated funding debates" (Luscombe, 2009, para. 3).

Some observers assert that thinning ranks of newspaper statehouse reporters "has led to diminished coverage" (Jurkowitz, 2014b, para. 3). Others have expressed concern that the quality of reporting has been comprised. The bipartisan National Conference of State Legislatures has repeatedly noted fewer articles about state affairs in the news media, cautioning that the "public is not being kept aware of important policy decisions that are being made that will affect their daily lives" (Peters, 2008; Enda, et al., 2014, para. 17). As noted earlier, there has been no empirical analysis of the overall health of state government reporting, a literature gap that this thesis seeks to fill.

Arguably, state policy, more than that at any other level of government, has a direct influence on citizens' lives. "Everything from names on birth certificates to how deep you have to be buried is determined in the state legislature," (personal communication, March 30, 2015) said longtime state government reporter, Jeff Stinson. While the number of reporters covering state government has drastically waned, state government actors have been busy.

Frustrated with gridlock in Congress, many national advocacy organizations are shifting their attention and efforts to the states, where they think more can be done for a lower price tag and with less scrutiny. "There's a growing sense among donors and activists that the best way to influence policy isn't in idle, gridlocked Washington. It's in statehouses and city halls," (Kardish, 2014, para. 3) wrote a Governing reporter in his analysis of the 2014 state and local elections. The prominence and far-reaching effects of

state policy decisions raise legitimate concerns that those with power in state government are not receiving adequate amounts of media coverage and scrutiny.

Even late-night comedian John Oliver is wary of the trend, jesting in a recent broadcast critiquing state government:

> Statehouses do a huge amount of work while no one is watching—from abortion, to gun control, to environmental legislation—and yet, admit it, you probably don't know who your state legislator is…Which means all those conspiracy theories about a shadow government are actually true, only it's not a group of billionaires meeting in a mountain lair in Zurich, it's a bunch of pasty bureaucrats meeting in a windowless committee room in Lansing, Michigan. (Oliver, 2014)

Indeed, a weakened media watchdog can have serious impacts on American democracy. Research indicates that the media are key players in holding government officials accountable. For example, a 2003 study published in "The Journal of Law, Economics, and Organization" found that "higher levels of political information" through news circulation leads to "more disciplined, less corrupt politicians" (Adserà, Boix, & Payne, 2003, p. 474). Other research has found that members of Congress who receive less media attention from their local outlets are less responsive to their constituencies' needs (Snyder & Stromberg, 2008).

There is evidence that state governments have already become more opaque as a result of the presumed erosion of state coverage. A biannual series of surveys conducted by the National Freedom of Information Coalition have found that the "downsizing and decline of local media play a key role in enabling state and local government secrecy" (Spivack, 2016, para. 17). More than half of respondents, comprised of news media and

government watchdog organizations, suggested that incidents of open records or proceedings violations in their states and local jurisdictions had increased from 2013-15 ("Biennial Open Government," 2016).

Evan Cornog, a former publisher of the *Columbia Journalism Review* said of the current status of state capitol reporting: "It's discouraging because there's just so much power in state government… And it's not as if we're functioning in a transparent environment. People are working hard to conceal stuff" (Peters, 2008, para. 6).

The future of state government reporting is unclear. Some hope that new, nontraditional outlets, such as Minnesota's *MinnPost* or Texas' *The Texas Tribune*, can fill the hole in coverage left behind by the legacy media (Gaining Ground, 2015; Kaiser, 2014; Yglesias, 2013; Jurkowitz, 2014a). Others are optimistic that national media outlets[1]—several of which have recently launched or strengthened their coverage of state capitols—will pick up the slack.

Nevertheless, it will be impossible to know if and when the hole has been filled without first knowing what has been lost. This thesis provides a baseline understanding of how statehouse journalism has fared over the last decade in three large U.S. states. It analyzes the strength of state government reporting from 2005 to 2014. Understanding whether and how the health of state government coverage has changed over time will help illuminate how citizens and their government may have been affected.

[1] In 2014, The *Associated Press* highlighted state news coverage as a "companywide priority" (White, 2014, para. 10) and created a team of "state government specialists" (para. 1) to collaborate with statehouse reporters and produce their own in-depth stories on government accountability. *Politico* announced in 2015 its goal to expand coverage of state capitals, starting in New York, New Jersey, and Florida (Edmonds, 2015). *Atlantic Media* and *The Washington Post* launched offshoots *Route Fifty* and *GovBeat*, respectively, as branches of coverage dedicated specifically to state policy and politics.

Measuring the Strength of State Government Coverage

There is no established benchmark from which to determine the strength of state government reporting. This is, in part, because all standards for news coverage are normative and based on a given individual's belief of what journalism in America should be or should do. Nonetheless, some trademarks of reporting are more-highly regarded and appreciated than others, both in theory and in practice. This thesis argues that two of the best measures for assessing the health of an outlet's state government coverage are: 1) the amount of in-depth news articles produced, and 2) the amount of investigative stories.

In-depth reporting. Generally speaking, there are two types of stories that reporters write: 1) commodity news, and 2) enterprise news (F. Johnson, personal communication, October 6, 2015). Commodity news is short and produced quickly to get news to readers as soon as possible. It typically consists of the facts made immediately available from outside sources and offers little, if any, independent analysis.

Enterprise news, alternatively, requires reporters and editors to delve deeper into a story's facts, examining new angles and/or adding new context and analysis (F. Johnson, personal communication, October 6, 2015). Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Susan Stranahan (2004) compared commodity news to "lots of little edibles to nosh on" (para. 1) at a cocktail party, while enterprise reporting was the "real meal" (para. 1).

Renowned reporter Murrey Marder put it this way:

> If I go to report a story, I don't operate as though I'm there simply to listen to what someone says. If that's what I'm going to be doing then I am a stenographer. I'm supposed to be, in my judgment, thinking about what this person is saying,

> whether he is answering my questions, whether I, as a pseudo-surrogate for the public, should be asking other things. ("This is Watchdog," 1998, para. 12)

This is, in essence, the difference between commodity and enterprise news: whether the reporter is adding valuable substance to an article rather than simply regurgitating information. And it is a key distinction. "More 'news' doesn't mean more reporting," (Waldman, 2013, para. 11) explained Steven Waldman, who led a Federal Communications Commission (FCC) working group to examine the changing media landscape in the digital age.

Several media observers suggest that pressures to quickly produce content for the digital world's 24/7 news cycle has led to an increase in short, commodity news articles and a corresponding decrease in in-depth news (Jacobson, 2015; Waldman, 2011; Waldman, 2013). The resulting FCC report from Waldman's (2011) working group shared admissions from newspaper reporters and editors that "they are spending more time on reactive stories and less on labor-intensive 'enterprise' pieces" (p. 12). The report contains several acknowledgements of this trend from those on the front lines. A former editor of *The Tennessean* reported less time to devote to in-depth statehouse coverage. And staff from Illinois' *The News-Gazette* and California's *Vallejo Times* lamented how staffing cuts and other pressures made it harder to do in-depth reporting and statehouse investigations.

The resulting concerns are twofold: First, readers of news are receiving less information overall, including the important context and analysis that only enterprise reporting can provide. Second, time-strapped reporters are more regularly pushed to use

easily-accessible information, even if the sources are questionable and there is not time for thorough vetting.

PRC research from 2010 found that, "[a]s the press scales back on original reporting and dissemination, reproducing other people's work becomes a bigger part of the news media system," ("How News Happens," 2010, p. 4). Specifically, reporters increasingly rely on news from press releases. Pew discovered that "official press releases often appear word for word in first accounts of events, though often not noted as such" ("How News Happens," 2010, p. 2).

The pressure to produce content quickly has overwhelmed even the best reporters. In 2011, Sari Horwitz, a three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning *Washington Post* reporter[2] was suspended for three months without pay for plagiarizing news from another outlet (Farhi, 2011). In her official apology, Horwitz explained, "Under the pressure of tight deadlines, I did something I have never done in my entire career. I used another newspaper's work as if it were my own. It was wrong. It was inexcusable" (Farhi, 2011, para. 9). Horwitz's colleagues added that she had been under deadline to file a story for the *Post*'s website and was "rushing to write between two other scheduled interviews for a longer story" (Pexton, 2011, para. 12). This is just one example of the ways in which reporters in today's media landscape are struggling to meet the standards of an earlier time; to do more with less.

The strength of an outlet's state government coverage can be measured, in large part, by the amount of in-depth news articles it produces. In-depth news coverage is more likely to occur when a newsroom is well-staffed and well-supported. When reporters

[2] Sari Horwitz was one of three reporters from *The Washington Post* to win a Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting in 2002 for the earlier-mentioned series on deaths of foster children under the care of D.C.'s child protection system.

covering the statehouse beat are stretched thin, stories are more likely to either go uncovered or to be covered with less depth, context, or analysis. Important but obscure angles are more likely to be overlooked, and seemingly disparate dots of information go unconnected. Further, as reporters are increasingly pressured to fill a 24/7 news cycle, they will use their time to write more commodity news at the expense of in-depth pieces.

Investigative reporting. Investigative reporting is used in this research as a second measure of the vitality of a newspaper's state government coverage because it is time-consuming, expensive, and requires the backing of a powerful institution should the critiqued entity respond with public criticism and/or legal action. Investigative reporting has a storied tradition in American journalism, and, when it is done well, "sets the standard against which all news reporting is judged" (Aucoin, 2005). Before addressing the ways in which investigative reporting was affected by the financial downturn, the following sections address how investigative reporting is defined in this analysis and review the historic role it has played in American culture and politics.

Defining investigative reporting. Defining and measuring investigative reporting is complicated by several factors, including that media practitioners and scholars have struggled to reach consensus on what to call it. It has been labeled muckraking or watchdog, accountability, public-service, and independent reporting, among other terms (Feldstein, 2009, p. 788; Starkman 2014, p. 8). There is also no consesus over whether it should be considered "a practice, tradition, genre, or something else entirely" (Gill, 2006, p. 14).

Some claim that "all reporting is investigative" (Protess, Cook, Doppelt, Ettema, Gordon, Leff, & Miller, 1992, p. 4) because every journalist seeks facts as part of their

regular reporting routine (Bennett & Serrin, 2005, p. 169; Feldstein, 2006, p. 106). In fact, famous journalist Carl Bernstein once said there was nothing special about the reporting he and Bob Woodward conducted to expose the Watergate scandal: "I don't particularly buy…the idea of so-called investigative reporting as some kind of separate pseudo-science…All good reporting really is based on the same thing, the same kind of work" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 85).

Alternatively, some hold that investigative reporting is a specialty that requires unique talents, such as the "ability to use public records;" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 85) to "see and understand relationships between people and institutions;" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 85) and the ability to "[clarify] the significance of documented activities by asking probing questions of public officials and authorities" (Bennett & Serrin, 2005, p. 169).

Other conceptions focus on the role of investigative reporting in American democracy, praising the hallowed stories of injustice by those in power. This is the idealized, sacrosanct version of investigative reporting that "closely resembles the American ideal of popular democracy" (Protess, et. al, p. 3). The work of these journalists is despised by "secretive power," (Pilger, 2005, p. xv) as it "push[es] back screens, peer[s] behind facades, [and] lift[s] rocks" (p. xv). Ettema and Glasser (1998) explain:

> Their stories call attention to the breakdown of social systems and the disorder within public institutions that cause injury and injustice; in turn, their stories implicitly demand the response of public officials—and the public itself—to that breakdown and disorder. (p. 3)

Despite these varied perspectives, there are two characteristics most predominantly used by scholars and practitioners alike to describe investigative journalism: 1) that it requires extraordinary reporting effort, and 2) that it holds those with power accountable to the public.

Extraordinary reporting effort. Many have contended that investigative journalism is distinguished because it goes above and beyond the standard reporting practice of "documenting, questioning, and investigating" (Bennett & Serrin, 2005, p. 169). Journalist and author Curtis MacDougall explains:

> [T]he investigative reporter is like any other kind of reporter, only more so. More inquisitive, more skeptical, more resourceful and imaginative in knowing where to look for facts, more ingenious in circumventing obstacles, more indefatigable in the pursuit of facts and able to endure drudgery and discomfort. (Protess, et. al., 1992, p. 5)

Additionally, this camp argues, investigative reporting goes beyond "incremental snapshots of the previous day's news" (Starkman, 2014, p. 34). It "call[s] attention to the breakdown of social systems and the disorder within public institutions that cause injury and injustice" (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, p. 3).

In a 1974 speech, former Washington Post publisher Katherine Graham said investigative reporting "zeroes in on systems and institutions, in the public or private realm, to find out how they really work, who exercises power, who benefits and who gets hurt" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 88). A strong investigative article will place a given issue within the larger context; it emphasizes the sickness rather than just the symptoms.

James Aucoin (2005) writes that "serious investigative journalism [takes] a comprehensive, exhaustive look at issues that have significant impact on the lives of the audience… The standards for documentation, context, and presentation are rigorous and have been derived from the best work of the best practitioners in the history of American journalism" (p. 3).

In this way, an investigative article may take months, or even years, to produce. A reporter—or team of reporters—could be required to sift through thousands of public records, interview hundreds of people, or conduct a full-scale data analysis, among other tasks.

As then-editor of *The Boston Globe* Marty Baron said in a 2009 speech, "good journalism does not come cheap. The most powerful journalism—breakthrough journalism—can be shockingly expensive" ("2009 Louis M. Lyons Award," 2009, para. 91). A single investigation can cost anywhere "from a few thousand dollars to hundreds of thousands of dollars, depending on the salary costs and the travel expenses" (Houston, 2010, p. 52). And this estimate does not account for the cost of time.

"Investigative reporting means freeing a reporter from the normal constraints of time and space and letting the report really inform the public about a situation of vital importance," (Aucoin, 2005, p. 190) said investigative reporter Gene Roberts in 1988. In the era of digital news, extra time is an amenity rarely afforded to reporters. For newspapers trapped in a triage situation—strapped for revenue and pressured to push out content at lightning-speed—investigative journalism can become more of a luxury than a necessity.

Holds those with power to account. Another key attribute of investigative reporting is that it challenges those with power on behalf of the public, often revealing information someone would have preferred to keep secret (Feldstein, 2006; Pilger 2005; Protess, et. al., 1992; Starkman, 2014; Waisbord, 2000).

This element of investigative journalism, relentlessly homing in on suspected public wrongdoing in order to deter those in power from straying from the straight and narrow, is highly valued by news consumers. A 2013 PRC study found that public evaluations of news outlets' performance on measures like accuracy, fairness, and independence remained near all-time lows; however:

> There is a bright spot among these otherwise gloomy ratings: Broad majorities continue to say the press acts as a watchdog by preventing political leaders from doing things that should not be done, a view that is as widely held today as at any point over the past three decades. ("Amid Criticism," 2013, para. 1)

Young readers, in particular, have increasingly grown to value the watchdog function and "say the press prevents misbehavior by political leaders" ("Amid Criticism," 2013, para. 11).

This accountability is critical for both practical and normative reasons. As described earlier, research indicates that corruption grows when media scrutiny wanes. According to Robert McChesney (2008):

> Democratic theory generally posits that society needs a journalism that is a rigorous watchdog of those in power and who want to be in power, can ferret out truths from lies, and can present a wide range of informed positions on the important issues of the day. (p. 25)

This thesis draws upon these two consensus elements of investigative journalism—extraordinary effort and a focus on accountability—to establish an operational method for distinguishing when an article is investigative. Specifically, for an article to be considered investigative, it must include time-intensive work conducted by newspaper staff that supports and/or enforces a negative critique of an entity with power in state government. See "Chapter 5" for more information.

A brief history of investigative journalism. In order to understand and evaluate investigative journalism today, it is necessary to review the historic, fluid role it has played in American democracy. Indeed, the investigative function of the press has existed longer than America itself: The first example came from the first newspaper of the Anglo-American colonies, *Publick Occurrences Both Foreign and Domestick*, which launched in Boston, MA, on September 25, 1690 (Aucoin, 2005, p. 19). British authorities shut down the three-page publication after only one issue when Benjamin Harris, the founder of the early publication, criticized the colonial government and exposed a "royal sex scandal in which the King of France 'used to lie with' his 'Sons Wife' [sic]" (Bennett, & Serrin, 2005, p. 172; Feldstein, 2009, p. 789).

In the decades leading up to and during the American Revolution, 30 or so pamphlets and newspapers in the colonies were used by rebels to spread opposition against British rule by revealing its corruption and abuse of power (Aucoin, 2005; Feldstein, 2006). Such efforts were "typically accomplished through slashing partisan attacks rather than objective reporting" (Feldstein, 2009, p. 90).

The practice of using the press to expose the hidden truths of people and institutions with power continued after the American Revolution, even when news outlets

were owned and controlled by political leaders (Aucoin, 2005). At the time the First Amendment was adopted in 1791, politicians openly used the press to amplify their platforms (Brown & Gitlin, 2011, p. 75). Newspaper editors were not guardians of journalistic objectivity; rather, they played important roles as political agents, "using their newspapers to direct the affairs of the party and coordinate its message" (Pasley, 2001, p. 13). Because of the partisan orientations of newspapers, early-nineteenth-century investigative reporting targeted exposés toward the opposing party. Other powerful entities, such as corporations, religious institutions, and the military, received little-to-no attention (Feldstein, 2006).

It was not until the 1830s, with the rise of the penny press that American media, and watchdog journalism along with it, reoriented to be objective and independent. Technological printing advancements facilitated mass production and reduced costs of newspapers, and urbanization concentrated populations in areas where publications could capitalize on reliably large circulations. Newspapers became financially self-sufficient, no longer relying on political parties or campaigns for subsidies. Publishers moved away from partisanship to avoid offending and losing their audience: "[S]ince profit was tied to circulation, nonpartisanship made economic sense to avoid antagonizing supporters of either political party" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 108). Penny press editors "embraced the exposure of corruption in government and other American institutions as part of their creed" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 23). It was during this time that news exposés first broadened their lens from political affairs exclusively to also exploring and critiquing social conditions related to industrialization and immigration (Aucoin, 2005).

Following the Civil War—which diverted journalists away from producing exposés—the press formally separated from political parties and "declared itself independent" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 25). This detachment empowered autonomous news outlets to become even more confrontational to powerful officials and institutions than ever before. In the 1870s, the *New York Sun* took on the Northern Pacific Railroad lobby, the War Department, and the Post Office; and the Cincinnati *Gazette* exposed federal corruption in connection with the building of Howard University (Summers, 1994). Nevertheless, despite their employers' increasing independence, some individual reporters continued to use their journalism to advocate for certain social and political reforms. For example, A.M. Gibson, the reporter behind the *New York Sun* exposés, almost exclusively covered Republican scandals. As described by media historian Mark Wahlgren Summers (1994), "it is hard to tell where the muckraker [Gibson] left off and the partisan began" (p. 90).

Although the rise of investigative reporting preceded the Civil War, it was not until the end of the nineteenth century that editors fully realized their readers' interest in investigative pieces (Aucoin, 2005). During this time, publishers like Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst started to specialize in "sensational scandal coverage" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 109); Nellie Bly feigned insanity and went undercover to expose the conditions of mental wards; and Ida B. Wells revealed hidden truths about lynching for African American newspapers (Feldstein, 2006). Despite its aggressiveness, this investigative journalism was "largely local in its reach and sporadic in its frequency" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 109).

The development of the transcontinental railroad during the Progressive Era gave way to "national distribution and marketing, which in turn created a demand for nationwide advertising and thus the first mass-circulation national news publications" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 109). Newspaper chains were able to distribute their content from coast to coast, and news circulation and readership boomed. This period from 1902-12 is considered the first heyday of watchdog journalism, often referred to as the first "golden age of public service journalism" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 109) or the "muckraking era" (Aucoin 2005, p. 33).

Reporters gained fame by targeting systemic problems that resulted from the U.S. Industrial Revolution, including "corporate wrongdoing, government misbehavior, and social injustice" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 109). In its January 1903 edition, *McClure's Magazine* published three powerful exposés that encapsulate muckraking at its peak: an installment of Ida Tarbell's series on the history of John D. Rockefeller's Standard Oil Company; Lincoln Steffens's exposure of municipal corruption in "The Shame of Minneapolis;" and Ray Stannard Baker's examination of working conditions in American coal mines (Aucoin, 2005; Feldstein, 2006; Starkman, 2014). The explorations were at once distinct and on the same subject, as the magazine's owner and editor Samuel S. McClure explained in the edition's accompanying editorial:

> How many of those who have read through this number of the magazine noticed that it contains three articles on one subject? We did not plan it so; it is a coincidence that the January MCCLURE'S [sic] is such an arraignment of American character as should make every one of us stop and think…Capitalists,

> workingmen, politicians, citizens—all breaking the law, or letting it be broken. Who is left to uphold it? ("Concerning Three Articles," 1903, p. 336)

McClure's statement reflects a position that is held by many to this day: that investigative journalism transcends subject matters, uncovering injustice wherever it may be.

It was also during this period, in 1906, that President Theodore Roosevelt famously described investigative journalists as "muckrakers" and pleaded for them to show restraint (Protess, et. al., 1992, p. 7). Roosevelt compared prominent journalists of his time to a character from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a Christian allegory by John Bunyan, saying:

> [Y]ou may recall the description of the Man with the Muck Rake, the man who could look no way but downward, with the muck rake in his hand; who was offered a celestial crown for his muck rake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor. (PBS, n.d.)

Early twentieth century watchdogs "disdained party loyalty," and, because they were "writing for commercial organs supported by circulation, not political party subsidies, they were free to choose their targets as they liked" (Brown & Gitlin, 2011, p. 80). These muckrakers, exposed "wrongdoing for its own sake" and "without partisan agenda" (Starkman, 2014, p. 34). More than 2,000 investigative articles were published in American magazines during the muckraking era, institutionalizing the "investigative tradition into mainstream American journalism," (Aucoin, 2005, p. 33), if only for a short time.

By the time the country entered World War I in 1917, the muckrakers' reporting crested, and watchdog journalism began to swiftly evaporate, practically disappearing for the half century that followed. Feldstein (2006) refers to the era between World War I and the Vietnam War as the "Dark Ages for investigative reporting" (p. 110). There are several theories as to why muckraking vanished. Some have suggested that after World War I, Americans craved a "return to normalcy" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 36) and were content with the status quo that muckraking so often challenged. Another explanation is that the war shifted the nation's attention abroad (Aucoin, 2005; Feldstein, 2006).

But by the 1960s, a new age of watchdog journalism emerged with a wave of "crusading journalists [who] challenged segregation, the Vietnam War, political corruption, and corporate malfeasance" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 111). Like the muckrakers of the early 1900s, these journalists prioritized objectivity and avoided affiliating with political movements or campaigns.

If anything, they were "more dispassionate in tone, less blatant in their advocacy and political agitation…less radical than their forbearers" (Feldstein, 2006, p. 111). The 1960s developed "a skeptical, critical, and aggressive accountability journalism dedicated not to partisan triumph but to a sense of public service" (Schudson, 2011, p. 227). This "golden era" (Bennett & Serrin, 2005, p. 177) of widespread watchdog reporting included Seymour Hersh's My Lai investigations, as well as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's Watergate exposé.

In 1964, the Pulitzer Prize board created an annual award to honor investigative reporting (Downie, 2012). In the same year, the Supreme Court decision in *New York Times v. Sullivan* established the actual malice standard, raising the burden of proof on

officials critiqued by journalists who sue for libel. Shortly thereafter, Congress passed the Freedom of Information Act, which increased reporters' access to information (Downie, 2012).

As with watchdog reporting in the Progressive Era, this era's surge in investigative content was also short-lived, winding down during the 1970s. Various explanations for this have been offered, such as the end of political turmoil following President Richard Nixon's resignation, the reemergence of media mergers, and waning public skepticism (Feldstein, 2006).

Contemporary investigative reporting. Perhaps more than most types of coverage, today's newspapers have a financial incentive to produce investigative reporting: National awards can draw attention that grows circulation, and investigative units can build a publication's brand (Aucoin, 2005; Waldman, 2011). This may have helped to somewhat sustain investigative reporting during the recent tumult. It is hard to know, though, as there is little empirical analysis on the quantity, style, or practice of contemporary watchdog reporting in America (i.e., that which has been produced since the end of the watchdogs' second golden era in the late 1970s). Scholars offer educated guesses about this period, including how the transformation of the news industry over the last decade might have affected investigative content at legacy institutions and led to new models for watchdog reporting, but hard data are scarce.

From 1984 to 2010, there was a 21 percent drop in the number of submissions to the Pulitzer Prize's investigative category (Waldman, 2011, p. 52). Robert Rosenthal, executive director of The Center for Investigative Reporting, explained the implications of these drops in a 2009 PBS interview:

> And what that means is that on every level there's less information, less government being covered, from the community to the state to the region. And part of what's happening is the [sic] investigative reporting is something that's being shoved aside in newsrooms that really sort of have to feed the beast. And it's—I think the negative impact on all of us is drastic. ("Investigative Reporting," 2009)

To the extent this decline in submissions reflects an actual reduction in investigative coverage, the trend may be partly explained by attrition in the number of dedicated investigative staff.

While there is no reliable count of the number of full-time investigative journalists today, indirect measures point to a decline (Waldman, 2011, p. 11). In 2010, the American Journalism Review reported that the membership of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE)—the premiere professional investigative journalism organization—dropped by more than 30 percent from 2003 (5,391) to a 10-year low in 2009 (3,695), before ticking back up to about 4,000 in 2010, the latest year of data available (Waldman, 2011; Walton, 2010, para. 7).

Media observers agree that the contemporary period has not been "a rich time of watchdog reporting in any media" (Bennett & Serrin, 2005, p. 178). Bennett & Serrin (2005) identify two dominant themes of watchdog journalism in the modern era: 1) that the watchdog role has become "overly stylized or ritualized," (p. 179) focusing on topics of little social consequence with a cynical tone, and 2) that "when potentially significant investigative reports do surface they are often not pursued or even echoed by other organizations cautiously following the collective lead" (p. 179).

An example of the latter is thoroughly detailed in Starkman's 2014 case study of the business press's shortcomings related to the 2008 financial crisis. He dedicates a chapter to "three journalism outsiders" (p. 211) that covered the impending mortgage frenzy, while the mainstream press neglected it.

Anecdotally, scholars assert that substantive investigative journalism in the twenty-first century has been overshadowed by "hyped, razzle-dazzle, scare-the-viewers reporting" (Aucoin, 2005, p. 3) and "irresponsible scandal coverage" (Feldstein, 2009, p. 793) pursued solely to attract readers.

If there is one platform where modern investigative journalism can thrive, some argue, it is through nonprofit and digital news organizations (Houston, 2010; Walton, 2010; Yglesias, 2013; Kaiser, 2014; Jurkowitz, 2014a; Gaining Ground, 2015). A 2014 study by the PRC found that most investigative "muscle in the digital news world comes from some of the larger nonprofit organizations—such as ProPublica, the Center for Investigative Reporting and the Center for Public Integrity" (Jurkowitz, 2014a), or through partnerships with legacy news publications like *The New York Times*. But others remain skeptical. Usher & Hindman (2015) counter that few nonprofit news organizations have succeeded in expanding staff or their share of web traffic.

While national nonprofits and legacy partnerships can offer valid investigative reporting on state and local governments, scholars have argued that the most effective work comes from journalists who live in the communities they monitor. An informed citizenry requires independent reporting that holds the powerful accountable to "society's expectations of integrity and fairness," (Downie & Schudson, 2009, para. 20) and these expectations can vary dramatically across communities and states. To do their best work,

these scholars argue, a reporter needs to be on the ground in a state to truly understand those citizens' expectations, concerns, and values—to live and breathe the stories they are covering. Former *Boston Globe* investigative reporter Stephen Kurkjian reflects:

> With more experiences in various systems, when you pay your bills and when your kids go to school, you become more of a judge as to what shouldn't be and what should be…The more part of a community you get, the more cautious you become but the more accurate becomes your sense of personal outrage. (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, p. 69-70)

It is in this way, argue James Ettema and Theodore Glasser (1998), that investigative reporters engage in an "ongoing moral relationship with their communities" (p. 70) that is critical for holding those in power accountable.

Others claim that politically-motivated investigations will, for better or for worse, fill the vacuum left behind by objective legacy news media (Houston, 2010, p. 53). History shows that investigative coverage thrives most when produced from a frame of objectivity (e.g. reporting in the 1870s, early 1900s, and 1960s). When politics are the guiding force behind investigative coverage, the focus of critiques becomes narrow and biased, resulting in neglected coverage of other important institutions (e.g. in the 1800s).

This thesis asserts that the strength of an outlet's state government coverage can be evaluated, in large part, by the amount of investigative coverage it produces. While investigative reporting has historically been viewed as one of the most vital roles of the American press, it is also slow to produce, expensive, and requires financial and legal support from a stable news organization. Investigative reporting, like in-depth news coverage overall, is more likely to be produced when a newsroom is in adequate supply

of staff and resources. When newsrooms undergo budget and staff shortages, this thesis suggests that levels of investigative coverage on key players in state government will fall away.

Chapter 3: A History of Six Large U.S. Newspapers

Each of the six outlets examined in this thesis have rich histories that influence how they operate today. To home in on the historical elements that are most relevant to this research, a brief summary of each outlet's ownership timeline, as well as key financial moments over the previous decade, are detailed below. It is important to note that the breadth and nature of financial information available varies widely from outlet-to-outlet, and it often depends on the company's own disclosure of their finances.

Extra attention is paid to instances of staff layoffs because, as theorized earlier, an institution's reporting capacity is likely to affect the type and strength of content it produces. The history and financial highlights below are not exhaustive, but they do provide valuable insights on the histories of these six publications over the study period.

For information on how these states and outlets were selected for inclusion in this analysis, see Chapter 5.

California's *Los Angeles Times*

"Stand Fast, Stand Firm, Stand Sure, Stand True" (Irwin, 2013, p. 32).

– The *Los Angeles' Times* motto in 1882

Ownership history. California's *Los Angeles Times* was first published as the *Los Angeles Daily Times* on December 4, 1881. The paper's original founders ran out of funds to support the paper within one year, and the publication was taken over by its printer, the Mirror Printing Office and Book Bindery ("The Los Angeles Times' History," 2012).

Around the same time, the printer hired the staunchly Republican former military officer Harrison Gray Otis as editor. Otis is attributed with making the newspaper

financially prosperous. In 1884, Otis and a partner purchased all Times and Mirror properties and created the Times-Mirror Company. Otis became full owner of the company in 1886 ("The Los Angeles Times' History," 2012). When Otis died in 1917, his son-in-law Harry Chandler became publisher.

The Chandler family continued publishing the paper until 1980.

In March 2000, Tribune Co. acquired the Times-Mirror Company in an $8 billion cash and stock deal. The merger created the nation's third-largest newspaper group, trailing only Gannett and Knight-Ridder (Jones, 2000).

Recent financial highlights.

- June 2004: The *Los Angeles Times* cuts 60 staff positions from its news division in response to lower-than-expected advertising revenue ("California; Los Angeles Times Cuts," 2004).
- November 2005: The *Los Angeles Times* cuts another 85 editorial positions, 8 percent of its newsroom staff ("L.A. Times to cut," 2005).
- October 2006: The Tribune Co. fires *Los Angeles Times* publisher Jeffrey Johnson for his refusal to cut additional newspaper staff. The *Los Angeles Times* lost more than 8 percent of its daily circulation since April 2006—the largest decline of any of the nation's largest newspapers. Between 2001 and 2006, the paper let go of 200 editorial positions ("L.A. Times Publisher Ousted," 2006; Ahrens, 2006).
- April 2007: The *Los Angeles Times* announces plans to cut an additional 70 newsroom jobs (Gentile, 2007).
- December 2008: Tribune Co. files for bankruptcy with $12.9 billion in debt (Rainey & Hiltzik, 2008).

- April 2009: The American Journalism Review publishes its survey of state government coverage and shows that *Los Angeles Times* has seven full-time state government reporters, an increase from 2003 (Dorroh, Gsell, & Skowronski, 2009).
- November 2013: Nearly one year after emerging from bankruptcy protection, the Tribune Co. announces plans to shed an additional 700 jobs as part of its restructuring plan. Over the last two years, Tribune Co. has lost $198 million in print advertising revenue ("Tribune Co. to cut 700," 2013; James & Hamilton, 2013).

California's *The Sacramento Bee*

> The object of this newspaper is not only independence but permanence. Relying upon a just, honorable and fearless course of conduct for its support, it expects only to make those men enemies who are enemies of the country. Its purpose is…to owe no thanks to any cliques or factions, but based on the broader foundations of right, to survive the wreck of mere party organizations, and still be supported by good and true men. ("McClatchy 150 years," 2007)
> – Unsigned editorial in *The Sacramento Bee*'s first edition on February 3, 1857

Ownership history. California's *The Sacramento Bee* started as *The Daily Bee*, which published its first issue on February 3, 1857. It is the flagship publication of The McClatchy Company ("About us," n.d.). *The Sacramento Bee*'s original owners were four local printers. In 1872, James McClatchy, an Irish immigrant with a background in journalism and gold-digging, bought his original share of the publication. By 1884, the McClatchy family had become the newspaper's sole owner ("McClatchy 150 years," 2007). In 2006, The McClatchy Co. purchased Knight-Ridder, making McClatchy the

second-largest newspaper company by circulation in the nation ("McClatchy 150 years," 2007).

Recent financial highlights.

- November-December 2006: *The Sacramento Bee*'s average weekly circulation drops 6 percent to 273,609 over a six-month period—falling at nearly twice the industry average. The company employs 1,542 staff across all departments and about 300 in the newsroom. Twenty positions are cut from the circulation department, and three reporters accept buyouts (Anderson, 2006; Turner, 2006).
- June 2008: *The Sacramento Bee* eliminates 86 jobs as part of a 10 percent staffing cut on all papers owned by McClatchy. The company's advertising revenue has dropped 15 percent in just five months, driving total revenues to decline by 14 percent over the same period ("Sacramento Bee buys out," 2008; St. John, 2008).
- August-September 2008: *The Sacramento Bee* offers voluntary buyouts to 55 percent of its full-time employees. McClatchy imposes a one-year salary freeze for all employees. McClatchy has $2 billion in debt remaining from its 2006 purchase of Knight-Ridder ("Sacramento Bee Offers," 2008; Turner, 2008).
- March 2009: *The Sacramento Bee* cuts 29 editorial staff positions ("Sacramento Bee cuts 128," 2009).
- April 2009: The American Journalism Review publishes its survey of state government coverage and shows that *The Sacramento Bee* has 10 full-time state government reporters, the same number that it employed in 2003 (Dorroh, Gsell, & Skowronski, 2009).

- May 2011: From 2008 to 2011, *The Sacramento Bee* eliminated nearly 400 positions; the paper's staff has been reduced by 55 percent since 2006 (Turner, 2011).

Florida's *Tampa Bay Times*

> I want the whole staff to suffer – bleed – and to weep with me if there is one typographical error on Page 48 – a single wrong address in the whole multi-million classified ad department – one missed delivery of a paper before 6 a.m. – a wet paper in stormy weather – a badly printed picture – one little imperfection in our relation to all those beautiful readers. (Shedden, 2009, para. 107)
> – Nelson Poynter, editor of the *Tampa Bay Times* from 1939-78

Ownership history. Florida's *Tampa Bay Times* traces its lineage to the *West Hillsborough Times*, a weekly publication that began in July 1884 out of the back room of a pharmacy in Dunedin, FL. For its first three decades, the paper changed names and owners several times, continuously failing to turn a profit (Hooker, n.d.). In 1912, Indiana publisher Paul Poynter purchased the then-*St. Petersburg Times* (under the Times Publishing Co. umbrella) and, in 1924, changed it to a daily publication in the hopes of growing revenue (Shedden, 2009).

Nevertheless, the newspaper's finances remained troubled. In 1947, Paul Poynter sold majority share of Times Publishing Co. to his son, Nelson Poynter (Poynter), who had most recently been the outlet's editor. Poynter is credited with transforming the struggling paper into a "robust enterprise" (Hooker, n.d., para. 6). During Poynter's first 10 years as owner, daily circulation nearly tripled (Shedden, 2009).

Poynter was an eager innovator: Under his leadership, the *Tampa Bay Times* was one of the first newspapers to utilize color and graphics in printing, as well as zoned

editions with distinct bureaus across Florida (Goldman, 2015). Poynter also held strong views that newspapers should be independently-run institutions. In 1975, he created the Modern Media Institute, a journalism school, and just three years later, Poynter willed upon his death that the school would own controlling stock of Times Publishing Co. The Modern Media Institute was later renamed The Poynter Institute, as it is known today.

In November 2008, the then-*St. Petersburg Times* and competitor the *Miami Herald* merged their Tallahassee bureaus in an effort to maximize the resources of both institutions and expand in-depth statehouse reporting ("Times, Miami Herald to Combine," 2008). In 2012, the newspaper was rebranded as the *Tampa Bay Times*[3]. As of 2016, the newspaper is still owned by the nonprofit Poynter Institute.

Recent financial highlights.

- May 2008: The *St. Petersburg Times* announces its plans to downsize and freeze salaries ("Fla.'s St. Petersburg Times," 2008). From 2006 to 2008, the publication's full-time staff across all departments fell from 1,500 to 1,300 positions ("Times to Reduce Staff," 2008).
- August 2008: The *St. Petersburg* avoids layoffs when more than 200 staffers accept early retirement benefits. In this transition, the paper loses 40 percent of its staff who were age 50 years and older, likely concentrated among veteran staff ("Times Loses 200," 2008).
- February 2009: The *St. Petersburg Times* announces that pay freezes will continue for another year and that certain staff will be eligible for "buyouts" or early retirement benefits (Hinman, 2009).

[3] For purposes of clarity, at the close of Chapter 3, this research will use the name *Tampa Bay Times* to reference content from the outlet throughout the entirety of the study period, including before the name change.

- April 2009: The American Journalism Review publishes its survey of state government coverage and reveals that the combined *St. Petersburg Times/Miami Herald* bureau had five full-time statehouse reporters, a net loss of three reporters since 2003 (Dorroh, Gsell, & Skowronski, 2009).
- July 2009: The *St. Petersburg Times* begins liquefying assets to raise cash (Mullins, 2014).
- September 2009: *St. Petersburg Times* announces that it will cut staff salaries by 5 percent and phase out retiree health benefits (Behnken, 2009).
- 2010: Times Publishing Co.'s revenue from all publishing interests drops from $274 million in 2009 to $159 million in 2010, according to tax filings from the Poynter Institute (Mullins, 2014).
- September 2011: For the second time in two years, the *St. Petersburg Times* reduces salaries by 5 percent. Unlike the reduction in September 2009, this reduction is temporary ("Times Announces," 2011).
- 2012: Times Publishing Co.'s revenue from all publishing interests is $151 million, the same as it was the year before, but $8 million less than in 2010 (Mullins, 2014).
- June 2012: The Poynter Institute seeks new funding options when organization officials disclose that the *Tampa Bay Times* can no longer financially support its parent institution (Mullins, 2012).
- July 2012: The *Tampa Bay Times* ends the temporary 5 percent pay reduction that it enacted in September 2011 ("Times Set to Restore," 2012).

- Late-2013: The *Tampa Bay Times* obtains a $28 million loan from Boston-based Crystal Financial LLC by pledging six parcels of land, including its headquarters. The loan is set to come due in December 2016 (Mullins, 2014).
- November 2014: The Poynter Institute loses $3.5 million in fiscal 2013 (Kritzer, 2014).
- April 2015: The *Tampa Bay Times* has nearly 200 full-time news staff, less than half of its peak of 406 positions in 2006 (Goldman, 2015).

Florida's *Tallahassee Democrat*

> [It] will be our endeavor to preach and to practice the undying principles, and to follow the true and tried doctrines of the 'Old Time Democracy' of the fathers, as distinguished from the many mischievous and dangerous fads and fallacies which the professional politicians of the day,…have attempted to engraft upon the ancient and time-honored body of established Democratic principles. (Collins, 1905, p. 3)
>
> – John G. Collins, founder of *The Weekly True Democrat,* in the outlet's first issue on March 3, 1905

Ownership history. Florida's *Tallahassee Democrat* began as *The Weekly True Democrat*, which was established in Tallahassee, FL, and published its first issue on March 3, 1905 ("About the weekly true Democrat," n.d.). Three years later, the outlet's original owner, John G. Collins, sold the paper to entrepreneur Milton Smith, who converted it to a twice-weekly publication and, eventually, a daily (Kennerly, 1958, p. 152). Financial difficulties prompted Smith in 1929 to sell the publication—then called *The Daily Democrat*—to Col. Lloyd C. Griscom, a wealthy plantation owner in Leon County (in which Tallahassee is located) and a former U.S. ambassador to Italy

(Kennerly, 1958, pp. 154-155). Under Griscom's ownership, the newspaper's name was changed in 1947 to that by which it is known today, the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

In 1965, Griscom's wife, who was bequeathed ownership after the Colonel's death, sold the newspaper to its first corporate owner, Knight Newspapers (Ensley, 2015). In 1974, Knight Newspapers merged with Ridder Publications, forming Knight-Ridder Newspapers. At the time, Knight-Ridder was the nation's largest newspaper group and included the *Tallahassee Democrat*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *Detroit Free Press*, among others (George, 1990).

In late-2005, the first year examined in this research's study period, Knight-Ridder and Gannett swapped newspapers in several cities, including Tallahassee (Seelye, 2005). As of 2016, the *Tallahassee Democrat* remains under the ownership of Gannett.[4]

Recent financial highlights.

- December 2008: The *Tallahassee Democrat* cuts 25 newspaper positions. The publication self-reports that, while its audience and readership performance is steady, paid advertising—which accounts for 80 percent of the newspaper's revenue—is down drastically ("Q & A on Tallahassee," 2009).
- April 2009: The American Journalism Review publishes its survey of state government coverage and reveals that the *Tallahassee Democrat* has three full-time statehouse reporters—a drop from six in 2003 (Dorroh, Gsell, & Skowronski, 2009).

[4] In June 2015, Gannett split into two independent publicly-traded companies. As part of this restructuring, Gannett established its "USA TODAY Media Network," which encompasses the *Tallahassee Democrat*.

- July 2009: Gannett, the *Tallahassee Democrat*'s parent company, announces it will lay off 1,400 employees from across its 85 daily newspapers ("Gannett Announces," 2009).
- June 2011: The *Tallahassee Democrat* cuts 12 staff positions as part of Gannett's downsizing (Kaufman, 2011).
- September 2014: The *Tallahassee Democrat* announces a restructuring, in which newspaper employees are required to re-apply for new positions (Gabordi, 2014).
- March 2016: The *Tallahassee Democrat* masthead lists 29 reporters, including one dedicated capitol reporter—a decline from 60 full-time staff in 2009 ("Q & A on Tallahassee," 2009; "Tallahassee staff," n.d.).

Pennsylvania's *The Philadelphia Inquirer*

> There can be no better name than 'The Inquirer.' In a free state, there should always be an inquirer asking on behalf of the people: Why was this done? Why is that necessary work not done? Why is that man put forward? Why is that law proposed? Why? Why? Why? (Bernhard, 2007, p. 25)
> – John Norvell, co-founder of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, on June 1, 1829, remarking on a proof of the newspaper's first issue

Ownership history. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* began as *The Pennsylvania Inquirer*, which published its first issue in June 1829 and became the seventh daily newspaper in Philadelphia at the time. The paper's partners were John Norvell, the former editor of Philadelphia's *Aurora & Gazette*, and John R. Walker, a young printer (Williams, 2009). After only six months of ownership, Norvell and Walker sold the paper to Jesper Harding, the nation's leading Bible publisher. The publication remained under

the ownership of the Harding family until 1889. By then, the outlet's name had also been changed to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, as it is known today.

The new owner was British-born James Elverson; the paper stayed within his family until 1930. In 1936, the publication was sold to M.L. Annenberg, an established newspaper publisher and owner, for $12 million (Williams, 2009). After remaining in the Annenberg family for more than three decades, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was sold to Knight Newspapers in 1969.

As detailed in the history of Florida's *Tallahassee Democrat*, in 1974, a merger formed Knight-Ridder Newspapers. The *Philadelphia Inquirer* remained under the ownership of Knight-Ridder until 2006, after which point the paper would change ownership several times. When McClatchy Co. purchased Knight-Ridder in 2006, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was one of 12 less-profitable papers that McClatchy sold to finance the deal (Lieberman, 2006). Later that year, Philadelphia Media Holdings LLC purchased the publication (McClatchy, 2006).

In February 2009, Philadelphia Media Holdings filed for bankruptcy (Pérez-Peña, 2009). After a 20-month long bankruptcy proceeding, a newly-minted Philadelphia Media Network—comprised of several senior leaders who financed the paper's original purchase in 2006—acquired ownership of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and other Pennsylvania publications (E&P Staff, 2010).

In 2012, the Philadelphia Media Network changed owners for the fifth time in six years. A consortium of buyers formed Interstate General Media LLC to purchase the Network for $55 million (Launder & Adams, 2012). In 2016, though not captured in the timeframe of this thesis' analysis, Philadelphia Media Network owner Gerry Lenfest

donated the Network's publications to the Institute for Journalism in New Media, a subsidiary of the Philadelphia Foundation (Gammage, 2016).

Recent financial highlights.

- September 2005: *The Philadelphia Inquirer* announces it will reduce its editorial staff by 15 percent, from 500 to 425 positions (Loviglio, 2005).
- October 2006: The paper's new owner, Philadelphia Media Holdings, announces that future layoffs are unavoidable; cash flow in 2006 was $50 million—a drop from $100 million in 2004 (Walters, 2006).
- January 2007: Seventy-one newsroom employees—17 percent of the paper's editorial staff—are laid off (Loviglio, 2007).
- April 2009: The American Journalism Review publishes its survey of state government coverage and shows that *The Philadelphia Inquirer* has three full-time state government reporters, the same number that it had in 2003 (Dorroh, Gsell, & Skowronski, 2009).
- February 2012: Philadelphia Media Network announces another round of layoffs for 37 staff, forcing more cuts at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Dale, 2012).
- November 2014: *The Philadelphia Inquirer*'s parent company, Interstate General Media, offers buyouts to newsroom employees with 25 or more years of service. (Blumenthal, 2014). At this time, the newspaper employs roughly 220 editorial staff (Rieder, 2014).
- November 2015: *The Philadelphia Inquirer* lays off another 12 staffers (Mullin, 2015).

Pennsylvania's *The Patriot-News*

"The Press! whose vantage ground is Mind;
Language, its sceptre of control;
Its chariot wheels are thoughts that roll
And leave a track of light behind" (Morgan 1858, p. 349).

- An excerpt of an ode by Albert Laighton, used in 1858 to describe Harrisburg's newspapers—including the predecessor of *The Patriot News*

Ownership history. *The Patriot-News* originated as *The Pennsylvania Patriot*, which ran its first issue on March 4, 1854 (North, 1884). By 1858, the paper had been consolidated with two other local newspapers to create the *Patriot and Union* (Morgan, 1858, p. 350). The *Patriot and Union* later became two separate publications, which were both purchased in 1947 by World War II veteran and Newhouse publishing employee Edwin F. Russell (Advance Publications Inc., 1998; Meier, 2001). They remained that way for nearly 50 years, until 1996, when the two publications merged to become *The Patriot-News* (The Patriot-News, 2012).

Throughout the 2000s, *The Patriot-News* and its website Pennlive.com remained under the ownership of Advance Publications, run by descendants of the Newhouse family. The print publication and website operated as distinct companies until a 2012 restructuring combined them under the new PA Media Group. In January 2013, *The Patriot-News* switched from a daily publication to printing three days per week (The Patriot-News, 2012).

Recent financial highlights.

- October 2008: *The Patriot-News* employees with more than five years of experience are offered a voluntary buyout in an effort to reduce the staff by up to

25 percent. Newspaper costs have risen by 34 percent in just one year (Dochat, 2008).

- April 2009: The American Journalism Review publishes its survey of state government coverage and shows that *The Patriot-News* has three full-time state government reporters, the same number that it had in 2003 (Dorroh, Gsell, & Skowronski, 2009).
- 2011: *The Patriot-News*' affiliated website, Pennlive.com, sees an 80 percent growth in unique visitors from the year (The Patriot-News, 2012).
- August 2012: Circulation of *The Patriot-News* stands at 118,000—a decrease of 37,000 from 2002 (The Patriot-News, 2012).
- October 2012: *The Patriot-News* announces plans to lay off 70 of 230 employees (Brown, 2012).

Chapter 4: Research Questions

The objective of this study was to determine whether and how the strength of state government reporting changed during from 2005-14, a transformational era for the news industry.

Legacy media institutions faced an existential threat during this period. Their revenue mainstays—advertising and circulation—began crumbling under competition from the rise of the Internet as a news and advertising medium, a dynamic that was exacerbated by the nation's economic collapse beginning in 2007, the worst since the Great Depression.

In response, media companies slashed budgets, staff, and content, all whilst trying to navigate and leverage what they understood as the next frontier: online news. With the nation's economy in a more secure position, and the Internet firmly established as a destination for news consumers, it is necessary to examine this unique time period for the country and its Fourth Estate. Specifically, this research assesses how the strength of news coverage fared through this challenging period.

The recent financial struggles of newspapers have been well-documented, and media observers have detailed their concerns for the overall health of news, and, in turn, their concerns for the health of democracy.

This analysis aims to contribute hard data to the anecdotes by assessing two indicators of the health of state government coverage from 2005 to 2014: (1) the volume of news articles with more than 1,000 words (in-depth news coverage), and (2) the amount of investigative articles. The paper specifically focuses on state government reporting only, and the sample is limited to six U.S. newspapers.

Four research questions guide this assessment:

Research Question #1 (RQ1): Did the amount of in-depth state government news coverage change over the time period studied? If so, how?

Research Question #2 (RQ2): Did the amount of investigative articles focused on state government change over the time period studied? If so, how?

Research Question #3 (RQ3): Is there a correlation between the number of news reporters a publication has on staff and the amount of investigative articles produced?

Research Question #4 (RQ4): How did the six newspapers compare in their production of in-depth state government news coverage and investigative articles over the time period studied?

Chapter 5: Methodology

Ideally, this research would be grounded in an exhaustive, nationwide assessment of state government media coverage. However, such an approach was infeasible for this study, so, a sample of news coverage from six major print newspapers in three of the nation's most populous states was employed. The sample included coverage from each state's highest-circulated paper and its capital-based paper: California's *Los Angeles Times* and *The Sacramento Bee*, Florida's *Tampa Bay Times*[5] and *Tallahassee Democrat*, and Pennsylvania's *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Patriot-News*.

These states were selected for several reasons. First was their large populations, as California, Florida, and Pennsylvania are the nation's first, third, and sixth most populous states, respectively. Second, they are geographically and politically diverse, and all three have annual legislative sessions and annual budgeting processes. Third, the capital-based newspaper in each of the three states is not also a major city paper (e.g., Massachusetts' *The Boston Globe*), which would have presented media market issues. The fourth and final reason was a practical one: newspaper archives for each of the six outlets were accessible through the online news database, Nexis, for the length of the study period: January 1, 2005–December 31, 2014.

This study focused solely on print newspapers and print content because they remain the primary source of original reporting and news consumption (Mitchell, 2014; Downie & Schudson, 2009; Starr, 2009a), and they have historically set the narrative agenda for others in their media ecosystems (Houston, 2010). For example, a 2010 PRC

[5] As noted in Chapter 3, in January 2012, the *St. Petersburg Times* changed its name to the *Tampa Bay Times*. The change did not affect the Nexis archives or searches. For purposes of clarity, going forward, this research will use the name *Tampa Bay Times* to reference content from the outlet throughout the entirety of the study period, including before the name change.

study found that, among all outlets that produced local news in Baltimore, MD, newspapers provided 95 percent of all new information (How News Happens, 2010). Additionally, using data from as recent as 2014, PRC found that "most newspaper reading still happens in print," with more than 80 percent of readers relying on that medium at least some of the time (Barthel, 2015, para. 3). Finally, as explained later in this chapter, by using Nexis' filter to exclude online-only content, the sample was more narrowly focused and comparable across outlets.

To generate the sample, Nexis was searched by publication and by year using search terms targeted towards identifying articles specifically related to state government. To limit the sample to articles most likely to be in-depth, only articles with more than 1,000 words were included. It is reasonable to assume that shorter articles would have been unlikely to be in-depth. Similarly, because investigative journalism requires in-depth reporting and resource-intensive effort, it is unlikely that an investigative article would have been less than 1,001 words in length. Using the targeted keywords, an initial search was conducted to manually surface reoccurring duplicate headlines associated with non-substantive news coverage. These headlines were explicitly excluded from the final searches (see *Appendix A*).

The final searches used Nexis' options to group duplicates in order to avoid overstating the amount of original coverage that came from the newspapers. Although Nexis filtered-out most duplicates, some made it through to the sample that was coded. However, they were removed from the final analysis sample through a quality control (QC) process that was conducted after coding. (Additional information on the QC process

is below.) The searches also excluded non-business news[6] and irrelevant content from websites in an effort to reduce the amount of non-substantive news coverage in the original sample. The purpose of using the targeted search terms, the length requirement, and the Nexis filter options was to create an original sample of state government news from six print newspapers with as much in-depth substantive news as possible. The articles were searched by outlet from January 1 through December 31 for each year included in the study.

The original search resulted in a total of 20,726 articles. To make the sample more manageable for coding, systematic random sampling was used to reduce the number of articles to one-fifth of its initial amount, resulting in 4,145 articles (see *Table 1*). Afterwards, 207 additional articles—5 percent of the number of articles included in the coding sample—were extracted from the original 20,726 articles through systematic random sampling to be used to pre-test inter-coder reliability.[7] The pre-test of inter-coder reliability was completed after group trainings on the coding guide (see *Appendix B* for the complete coding guide). Each coder independently coded all 207 articles using the guide, noting articles about which they had questions. After the pre-test, the coding guide was refined to add clarity to variables with greater subjectivity and less agreement.

[6] Non-business news, according to Nexis' filters, includes obituaries, sports, reports, etc.
[7] It is possible that some of the articles in the pre-test sample were also included in the final coding sample. However, because the pre-test sample accounts for only 5 percent of the coding sample, it is likely that any resulting overlap was insubstantial.

Table 1: Outlets and Articles Included in Sample											
	Number of articles by year										
	2005	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**	**Totals**
Los Angeles Times											
Sample	105	99	72	54	52	54	36	31	30	36	**569**
The Sacramento Bee											
Sample	242	235	191	149	153	101	84	121	134	162	**1572**
Tampa Bay Times											
Sample	44	59	53	34	41	62	54	48	37	37	**469**
Tallahassee Democrat											
Sample	166	47	40	25	29	40	46	36	38	58	**525**
The Philadelphia Inquirer											
Sample	18	26	18	18	25	24	25	30	18	23	**225**
The Patriot-News											
Sample	60	49	67	39	41	75	135	143	99	77	**785**

Final coding of the 4,145 articles was completed by four separate coders. The first and second coders each coded 1,344 articles; the third coder coded 1,343 articles; and the fourth coder coded 1,365 articles[8]. There was an overlap of 417 articles—approximately 10 percent of the final coding sample—across all four coders. These overlapping articles were used for a post-test of inter-coder reliability. There were four variables in the coding guide—state, outlet, article type, and investigative—with finite coding options. On all but one, coders were in agreement at least 97 percent of the time. The Fleiss' kappa for the four variables showed substantial agreement, with all variables being .616 or larger (see *Table 2*).

Table 2. Inter-Coder Reliability Summary		
Variable	**Avg. Percent Agreement**	**Fleiss' Kappa**
2. State	100%	1
3. Outlet	100%	1
8. Article type	81%	.616
10. Investigative	97%	.629

[8] These totals include articles coded for post-test inter-coder reliability purposes.

After the post-test was conducted on the original, raw coding results, the data underwent a two-phased systematic QC process. Therefore, it is likely that the inter-coder reliability summary understates the actual level of agreement between coders in the final data set used for analysis. The first phase of the QC process identified and corrected unambiguously inaccurate coding entries. Custom Excel formulas highlighted duplicate entries, blank cells, and potential cases of coder error (e.g., a coder entered a coding option that was not available, a coder entered the wrong outlet code, or a coder mistyped the spelling of a month).

Coders then manually reviewed the flagged entries of other coders[9] and, when appropriate, recommended changes to the data. In cases of exactly identical duplicate articles, one article was kept, and the repeat(s) was deleted. (In total, 55 duplicate articles, representing 1 percent of the coded articles, were deleted from the final sample used for analysis.) Additionally, two articles that represented online-only news were also deleted from the sample to be coded, as this analysis was solely focused on print news. All recommendations were reviewed by coder 4, the author of this thesis, and changes were recorded in a separate Excel workbook for project management purposes.

The second phase of QC helped to ensure that coding was completed accurately and consistently across coders. Coders reviewed certain coding decisions among the two variables most open to interpretation: article type and investigative.

For article type, reviewers examined all coding decisions in which the code 99—indicating that the article type was unclear or other—was entered. If the reviewer disagreed with the coder's choice on article type, the article was flagged and notes were

[9] Both phases of QC relied on peer review. Coder 1 reviewed coder 2's data; coder 2 reviewed coder 3's data; coder 3 reviewed coder 4's data, and coder 4 reviewed coder 1's data.

added on the nature of the two coders' disagreement. Similarly, for investigative type, reviewers examined all coding decisions in which the codes 1, 2, or 99 were used; codes 1 and 2 indicated that an article was investigative to a certain degree, and code 99 was used if the investigative nature of the article was unclear. If the reviewer disagreed with the coder's choice on investigative type, the article was flagged and notes were added on the nature of the two coders' disagreement.

Here as well, all cases of disagreement were reviewed by coder 4, the author of the thesis. When appropriate, coder 4 changed the original coder's selection. As with phase 1 of QC, all changes were recorded in a separate Excel workbook. Finally, after the completion of both QC phases, the data were combined in a master spreadsheet and collated by outlet and by year in order to conduct systematic analysis. In total, after removing duplicative and online articles, there were 4,088 articles in the final sample to be analyzed.

All coders used an identical Excel workbook file for data entry. The prepared data shells included column headers, which helped to improve consistency. The coding guide provided instructions for each coder on how to code for 10 different variables within a given article. As noted earlier, only four variables had finite coding options: state, outlet, article type, and investigative. The remaining six variables coded were: coder identification, the month and year of an article's publication, article headline, article length, and the article's byline. These elements were necessary to distinguish between articles and to allow for comparisons across publications and time.

Coding Guide

State and outlet had finite coding options but were not left to interpretation by the coder. The two variables that were coded based off of a unique coder's judgement were: "article type" and "investigative."

To answer *RQ1,* which inquired whether and how the amount of in-depth state government news coverage changed over the time period studied, coders were asked to identify article type. Because this thesis focuses solely on content that is the result of original effort on behalf of any given publication in the sample, it was necessary for coders to distinguish article type. Coders selected from six article type options, including an option for "unclear/other." As explained, all articles that were originally coded as "unclear/other" were reviewed in the second phase of QC. The options—"news," "editorial," "column"—were defined as substantive news produced by newspaper staff. The remaining options were "Associated Press or other wire story," which included republished articles originally published by other news outlets; "letters to the editor;" and "op-ed." While these latter content types may contain new information for readers, they were not produced by newspaper staff, and, therefore, were excluded from the analysis on overall in-depth reporting output.

A limitation of this coding protocol is that articles coded as news were not also coded for their relevancy to state government. However, having the search terms targeted specifically towards state government coverage helped ensure that such articles were rarely included in the sample[10]. In the analysis, discussed in Chapter 7, in-depth news

[10] An unsystematic review of headlines found that the vast majority of articles were related to state government.

coverage was defined as substantive articles related to state government with more than 1,000 words that were authored by the outlet's staff.

To answer *RQ2,* which queried whether and how the amount of investigative articles focused on state government would change over the time period studied, coders were asked to identify the investigative nature of a given article. The coding guide was informed by the two consensus characteristics of investigative journalism identified in the literature review: extraordinary reporting effort and an orientation toward holding those with power accountable. An article was considered investigative only if it met the following two requirements: 1) it included time-intensive and analytical work formally conducted by the journalist; 2) a central aspect of the story included a negative critique of someone with power in state government.

An article was considered to be requiring time-intensive and analytical work formally conducted by the journalist if there was explicit mention of the newspaper obtaining records or conducting a data analysis or review of records, interviews, financial statements, etc. To help coders identify an explicit mention, the names of the newspapers, as well as common shorthand references (e.g., *The Bee*), were highlighted in yellow throughout each article.

An article was considered to be containing a negative critique if it indicated potential wrongdoing by an entity with power in state government. A reporter could not merely cover both sides of a contentious issue to produce an investigative article. Rather, a negative tone must have been used to indicate wrongdoing.

Coders were also asked to note if an article mentioned a previous investigation by the newspaper. However, these data were not used in the final analysis, as it was

infeasible to know without substantial research if the investigations mentioned met this study's guidelines and whether they fell within the study's time period.

Chapter 6: Hypotheses

The hypotheses below were informed by the literature review, as well as a thorough historical examination of the six newspapers included in the sample.

RQ1 asked whether and how the amount of in-depth news coverage—defined in this analysis as news articles with more than 1,000 words—on state government changed overall from 2005 through 2014. The first hypothesis (*H1*) predicts that in-depth news coverage generally declined over the 10 years studied and that the largest drop in coverage occurred from 2007-09, the years spanning the Great Recession.

> *Hypothesis #1 (H1)*: In-depth state government news coverage will decline over the study period, with the largest drop occurring during the Great Recession from 2007-09.

At the beginning of the study period, journalists were already under pressure to produce more content for the Internet's 24/7 news cycle, presumably resulting in shorter and less-substantive articles. Therefore, *H1* expects for in-depth news coverage to drop immediately. *H1* anticipates the largest drop to occur during the recession, as that is when most outlets in this sample began, and continued, to lay off employees. This thesis postulates that as the number of editorial staff in a newsroom declines—a strong indication that a news institution is struggling financially—the amount of in-depth coverage will also drop. In 2014, most of the newspapers in this sample continued to experience financial challenges, informing the prediction that in-depth coverage will not have recovered by the end of the study period.

Similarly, *RQ2* inquired whether and how the amount of investigative articles focused on an entity with power in state government would change over the last decade.

As detailed in the literature review, investigative journalism is resource-intensive: It is time-consuming, expensive, and requires the backing of a powerful institution should the critiqued entity respond with public criticism and/or legal action. Therefore, hypothesis 2 (*H2*) predicts that the number of investigative articles on state government will wane over the study period, as the outlets' resources constricted.

> *Hypothesis #2 (H2)*: Investigative reporting focused on state government will steadily decline throughout the study period.

H2 is also informed by the expectation that investigative reporting will decline over the study period because of a loss of reporters with years of experience covering state government. Several of the newspapers in the sample provided buyouts to staff who had been employed at the outlet for more than five years.

As the literature review notes, it takes experience to develop reliable sources and to understand the intricacies of state government. Reporters with less experience or whose coverage is spread over several beats presumably are less likely to pursue investigative stories on entities with power in state government.

Unlike *H1*, however, *H2* predicts only a general decline instead of a drastic drop from 2007-09; investigative journalism is a highly regarded and prized type of reporting that institutions are likely to value even in times of financial distress.

RQ3 queried whether a correlation exists between the number of news reporters on staff at a given publication and the amount of investigative articles produced. Investigative reporting can take several months—in some cases, years—to produce. Consequently, as a publication reduces the number of editorial staff, the remaining reporters are frequently left to fill the resulting holes in coverage. As mentioned earlier,

literature suggests that during the study period, reporters were increasingly encouraged to produce more, albeit less-substantive, content—diminishing the focus on investigative coverage.

Alternatively, if a newsroom has several reporters dedicated to covering state government, there is likely more flexibility for a journalist to pursue an investigation. Therefore, hypothesis 3 *(H3)* predicts that there will be a positive correlation between the number of news reporters on staff and the amount of investigative coverage produced.

> *Hypothesis #3 (H3)*: There will be a positive correlation between the number of news reporters a publication has on staff and the amount of investigative articles produced.

Importantly, *RQ3* does not seek to reach causal conclusions between the number of reporters on staff and the amount of investigative coverage on state government. Other variables are likely to play a role (e.g., investigative coverage on other topics, changes in requirements or procedures to access public records, publishing priorities, among others) for which this thesis does not model.

RQ4 asked how the six newspapers in the sample would compare in their production of in-depth reporting and investigative articles over the study period. None of the newspapers in the sample were immune from the rise of the Internet and the Great Recession: Each publication lost revenue and cut staff, among other responses to the financial strain.

A review of the outlets' histories led to no discernable reason for one paper to do better or worse than any other in the sample. Therefore, hypothesis 4 *(H4)* predicts that

the newspapers' production of in-depth state government reporting and investigative articles will be relatively similar over the time period.

> *Hypothesis #4 (H4)*: The six newspapers will be relatively similar in their production of in-depth news and investigative articles on state government over the time period studied.

Chapter 7: Discussion of Results

Coding results were systematically analyzed in order to answer the four research questions and determine whether the suppositions contained in the hypotheses were borne out by the evidence. The first two hypotheses relate to trends over time in the production of in-depth news and investigative articles, both overall and by outlet. The third hypothesis pertains to the relationship between the number of news reporters a publication had on staff and the amount of investigative articles it produced. And the fourth considers how the six outlets' production fared vis-à-vis one another.

The results show that the publications experienced a collective decline in production of in-depth news and investigative articles from 2005-14. Below those topline trends, however, was a great deal of variation by outlet.

In-Depth State Government News Coverage From 2005-14

H1 predicted that in-depth news coverage focused on state government would decline over the study period and that the largest drop would coincide with the Great Recession of 2007-09. Of the 4,088 articles coded, 2,703—or 66 percent—were categorized as news[11]. Importantly, as explained in Chapter 5, the articles coded represent a random sampling of one-fifth of all such coverage from the six newspapers.[12]

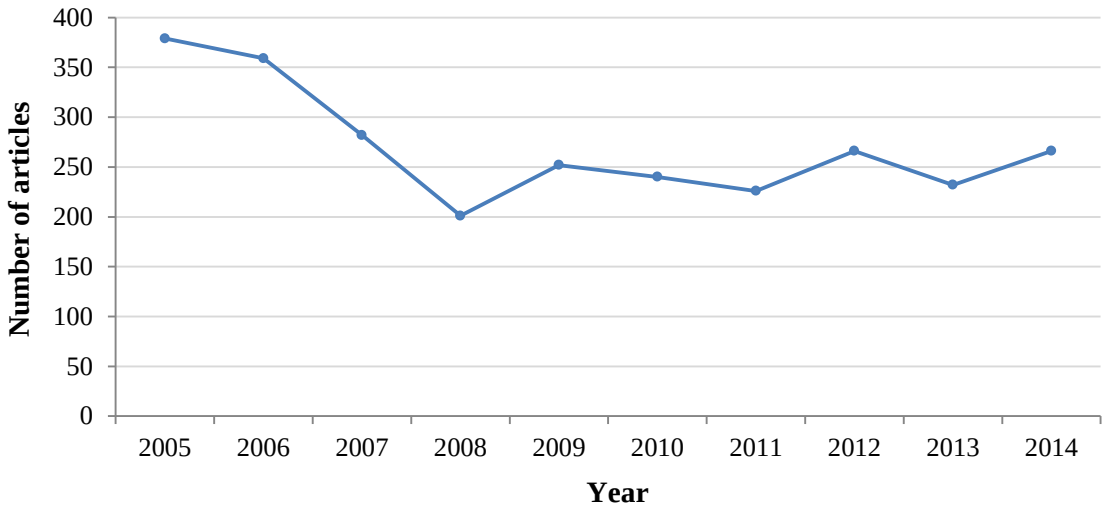
"In-depth news" is defined as substantive articles related to state government with more than 1,000 words that were authored by the outlet's staff. "In-depth news and opinion"—or "all substantive news"—combines news, editorials, and columns by newspaper staff with more than 1,000 words. Together, these categories represent all substantive, in-depth coverage generated by outlet staff. Articles coded as being among

[11] This reference does not include columns or editorials.
[12] The original sample was extracted by using key words targeted towards identifying articles specifically related to state government. See Chapter 5 for more information.

the remaining categories, such as wire stories and letters to the editor, were separated because they lacked substance and/or were not generated by original effort from outlet staff.

Across the six outlets, collective in-depth news coverage declined 30 percent from 2005-14, hitting its trough in 2008, with only 201 news articles (compared to 379 in 2005) (see *Figure 1*). From 2008 through the end of 2014, news coverage leveled off, experiencing mild fluctuations in the amount of coverage, but never recovering to pre-recession production levels. All substantive news coverage followed a similar pattern, a predictable trend, given the large number of news stories relative to opinion pieces.

Figure 1. Overall In-Depth News Coverage, 2005-14



The largest decline in news articles occurred from 2006-07, with a median drop of 29 percent across outlets (see *Table 3*). The next largest decline occurred the following year, from 2007-08, with a median fall of 24 percent. When looking at in-depth news and opinion coverage combined, the largest decline also occurred from 2006-07.

Table 3: Overall Year-Over-Year Median Percentage Change in Coverage, 2005-14										
	2005	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
In-depth news	n/a	-6%	-29%	-24%	26%	21%	-13%	19%	-10%	29%
In-depth news and opinion	n/a	-7%	-29%	-17%	29%	26%	-14%	18%	-12%	25%

Conclusion #1 (C1): *H1 was somewhat correct.* In-depth state government news coverage declined by 30 percent over the study period. But the largest median percentage decline from one year to another occurred directly before the Great Recession officially began, though the second-largest decline corresponded with the heart of the recession.

These findings support literature that says the struggles of legacy news media institutions preceded the Great Recession and that the economic contraction strained them further. Overall, declines in the amount of substantive news produced occurred directly before the start of the downturn and before most of the outlets began to heavily cut staff. This may suggest that the nature of content was shifting to shorter, more surface-level pieces, which would have been filtered out of this sample due to the 1,000 word threshold requirement.

Four of the six outlets experienced their largest percentage declines in in-depth news coverage between 2006 and 2008. *The Sacramento Bee* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had their largest drops in 2010 and 2013, respectively. However, there was significant variation in the trend by outlet over the study period, indicating that each publication experienced unique circumstances responding to their financial challenges (see *Appendix C.*) By 2014, half of the outlets—*The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Patriot-News*, and the *Tallahassee Democrat*—had recovered to their pre-recession peaks in

substantive news coverage, while the other half—the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Sacramento Bee*, and the *Tampa Bay Times*—had not.

Newspapers and their parent companies faced tough choices to withstand their financial headwinds. Some outlets may have prioritized in-depth news coverage, even in times of financial hardship, in an effort to retain or attract subscribers. Others may have been forced to cut substantive content early on in the downturn. Two of the outlets underwent ownership changes during the study period, which could have changed publishing priorities. And both Pennsylvania papers returning to peak by 2014 may signal regional differences in the depth and duration of legacy institutions' struggles. This thesis did not assess the budgets or reserves of the outlets to understand how well-prepared each were to weather an abrupt and sustained loss of revenue. These are only some examples of the many factors that could have driven differences across outlets.

Investigative Coverage on State Government from 2005-14

A key challenge with measuring investigative journalism over time is the lack of an established benchmark for how many investigative articles an outlet can be expected to produce per year, given its unique circumstances. Due to the extraordinary resources investigative work demands, it is reasonable to expect that such pieces will typically comprise a minority of an outlet's substantive news output.

Still, it is notable that the six outlets studied produced relatively few investigative pieces on state government. Among all but one—the *Tampa Bay Times* (10 percent)—investigative articles made up less than 5 percent of news coverage overall. *The Sacramento Bee* published nearly 50 investigative articles throughout the time period

studied—the highest number of all the outlets. On the other end of the spectrum, the *Tallahassee Democrat* produced only three (see *Table 4*).

Even without an established benchmark, however, fruitful insights can be drawn by comparing each outlet's investigative production to its own historical output. Additionally, in the later discussion of *C4*, the amount of investigative coverage produced by outlet is normalized to account for differences in the size of the outlets' respective state governments.

Table 4: Total Number of Investigative Articles Produced by Outlet	
Los Angeles Times	11
The Sacramento Bee	48
Tampa Bay Times	27
Tallahassee Democrat	3
The Philadelphia Inquirer	6
The Patriot-News	7

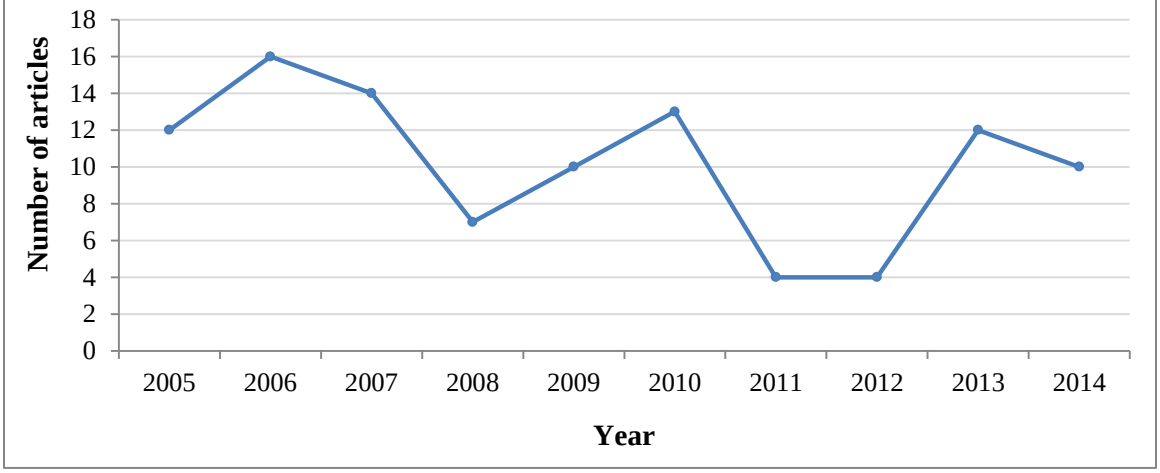
H2 predicted that the number of investigative articles about state government would decline over the study period, as the outlets' resources diminished. As explained in Chapter 5, an article was considered investigative only if it met the following two requirements: 1) it included time-intensive and analytical work formally conducted by the journalist; 2) a central aspect of the story included a negative critique of someone with power in state government.

The analysis finds that, overall, investigative coverage decreased over the study period, but that there were great fluctuations in the amount of investigative articles over the 10 years studied.

From 2005-14, overall investigative news coverage dropped 17 percent, from 12 articles to 10 (see *Figure 2*). However, over the duration of the study period, investigative reporting experienced just as many year-over-year increases as it did decreases. In other words, investigative reporting from the six outlets showed volatile swings in production over the time period studied.

Conclusion #2 (C2): *H2 was incorrect.* Although investigative reporting on state government declined over the study period, it did not decline steadily.

Figure 2. Overall Investigative Coverage, 2005-14



Similar to the amount of substantive news coverage over time, there was substantial variation across outlets in regards to the amount of investigative coverage they produced from 2005-14 (See *Appendix D*). Over the study period, half of the outlets experienced three or more consecutive years without any investigative coverage on state government: The *Los Angeles Times* had no investigative articles from 2010-12; *The Philadelphia Inquirer* had no investigative articles from 2009-13; and the *Tallahassee Democrat* had no investigative articles from 2009-14. This finding could indicate that

newspapers, faced with smaller budgets and staff following the Great Recession, struggled to produce investigative articles at the same rate they did before the downturn.

By 2014, all but one outlet (the *Tampa Bay Times*) had failed to produce the same number of investigative articles on state government as they did during their pre-recession peaks.[13] This holds true even when the data are normalized to account for changes in the size of state government, as explained in the discussion of *C4* below.

An interesting finding comes to light when comparing the recoveries of in-depth news reporting and investigative coverage: Whereas by 2014 half of this sample's outlets had recovered to their pre-recession peaks in production of substantive news coverage, investigative coverage had recovered at only one. Although both recoveries are relatively weak, these results could indicate that publications are able to more quickly recover in-depth news coverage lost during downturns than investigative reporting.

As the literature notes, investigative coverage on state governments requires experienced reporters with reliable sources and a strong knowledge on the workings of state government. During the downturn, several of these outlets provided buyouts to staff who had been employees for several years. The amount of time it takes for newer staff to learn the state government beat could presumably contribute to the lag in recovery of investigative coverage.

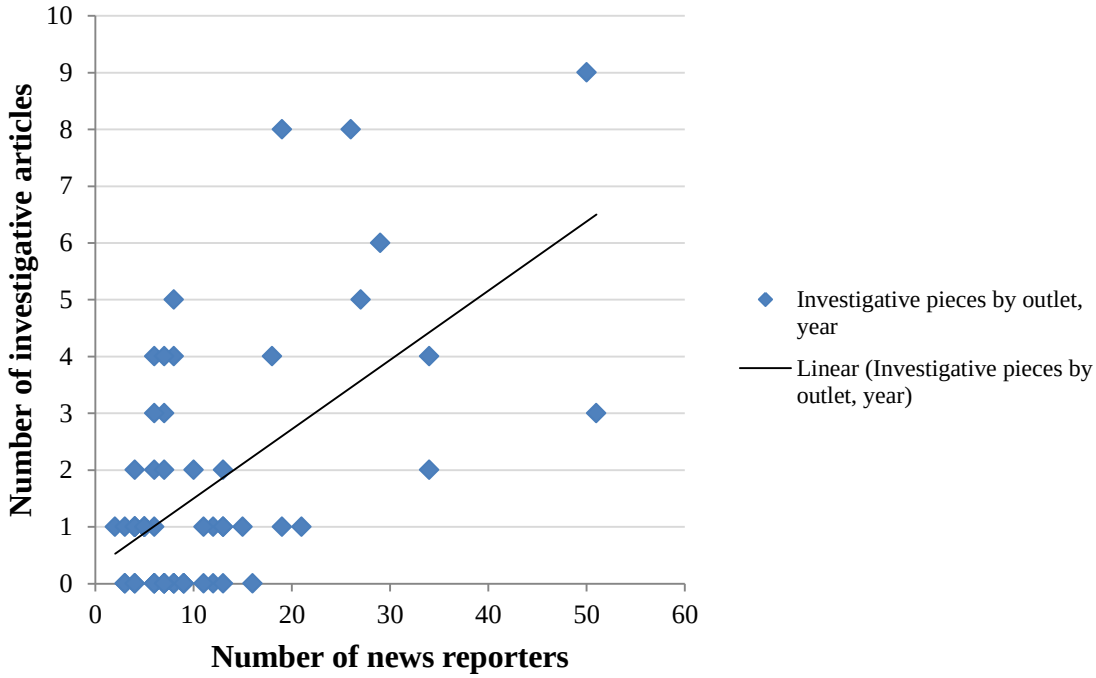
The Correlation between Newspaper Staff and Investigative Coverage

H3 predicted that a positive correlation would exist between the number of news reporters on a given publication's staff and the amount of investigative coverage produced by that publication. The analysis finds that, overall, there was a positive linear

[13] *The Sacramento Bee* came close to recovering to its pre-recession peak of investigative article production in 2010 and 2013.

correlation between the amount of news reporters a publication had on staff and the amount of investigative articles produced (see *Figure 3*).

Figure 3. Correlation Between the Overall Number of News Reporters and Investigative Articles



Conclusion #3 (CS): H3 was correct. There was a positive correlation between the number of news reporters a publication had on staff and the amount of investigative articles produced.

This trend indicates that a larger number of news reporters at a given publication correlates with a larger amount of investigative coverage on state government[14]. This finding could give credence to the idea that a well-staffed newsroom will produces more investigative coverage. However, as noted previously, this analysis does not seek to reach

[14] An unsystematic review indicates that reporters who authored investigative articles typically also produced additional in-depth news pieces on state government throughout the same year.

causal conclusions between the number of reporters on staff and the amount of investigative coverage on state government produced.

Further, this assessment does not measure the strength of the correlation. It is also important to clarify that the number of reporters was determined by counting only reporters who had produced more than one in-depth news article during a given year.

The positive correlation between these two variables overall did not hold true for each outlet. Unexpectedly, half of the outlets—*The Philadelphia Inquirer, The Patriot-News*, and the *Tallahassee Democrat*—displayed a negative correlation between the number of news reporters and the number of investigative articles produced.

Several factors could be behind this variation. For example, in the three cases of a negative correlation, reporters—fearful of losing their jobs—could have felt pressure to produce more in-depth, investigative reporting to demonstrate their skills and irreplaceability.

Further, outlets could have prioritized investigative reporting, even in times of financial strain, because these types of stories receive a great deal of attention. Producing a widely read, well-received investigative series, especially if it leads to accolades or other markers of acclaim, may help a publication rebuild readership more so than covering only the daily news. Another explanation could be that reporters were doing investigative coverage on local government or private business, which would not have been captured in this sample.

Comparing Outlets' Production of In-Depth Reporting and Investigative Articles

H4 predicted that, over the time period studied, the six outlets in the sample would be relatively similar in their production of in-depth news and investigative articles focused on state government.

When comparing the amount of in-depth state government news coverage across outlets, it is important to account for differences in the relative size of governments. It is reasonable to assume that the size of government, measured by the number of full-time employees of the state (i.e., the core subjects of these stories), is related to overall activity and therefore potential story material.

For example, comparing the raw output of a newspaper located in a relatively large state to one located in a relatively smaller one is instructive, but perhaps insufficient without factoring in the size of the respective governments they cover. It may be the case that while the newspaper located in a large state published more in-depth stories in a given year overall, the relative output of each may be more closely aligned or reversed after normalizing for the size of government. The same issue applies as one examines the magnitude of a particular outlet's coverage over time, as well as their editorial capacity.

To account for this variable, annual state employment data (not seasonally adjusted) were collected from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics from 2005-14. These data were used to calculate the number of in-depth news articles overall that each outlet published per 50,000 state employees for each year, as well as the number of investigative pieces per 100,000 state employees. The latter metric uses a larger benchmark to account for the small number of investigative pieces relative to all in-depth articles.

The analysis finds that, surprisingly, there was noticeable variation between outlets in their production of in-depth news and investigative articles, when adjusted for the size of their respective state governments.

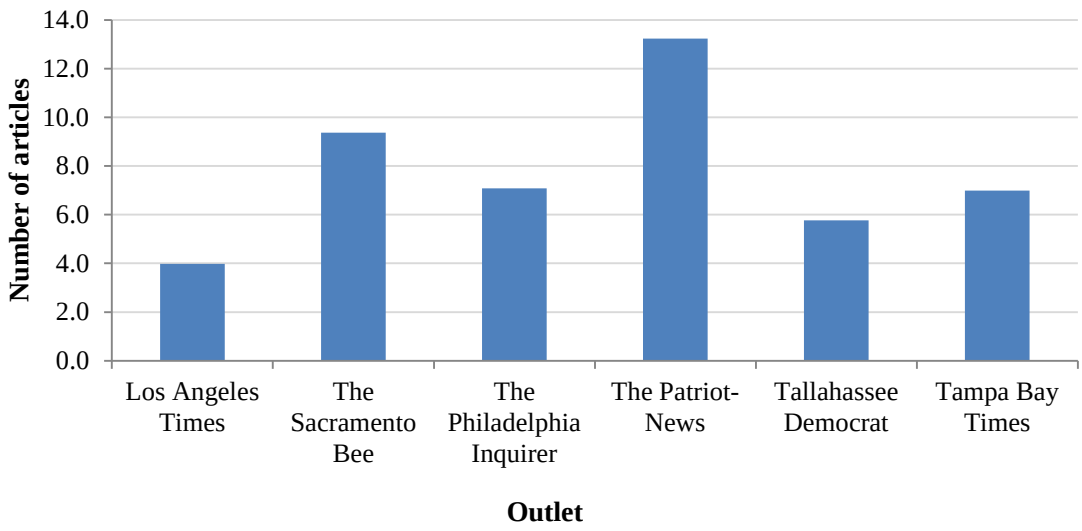
Conclusion #4 (C4): H4 was incorrect. There was substantial variation across outlets in their production of in-depth news and investigative articles on state government over the time period studied.

Of the six outlets, *The Patriot-News* produced the highest median number of news articles (13) per 50,000 state employees over the study period, which is surprising considering its switch in 2013 to publishing only three times per week—the only outlet in the sample to reduce publishing frequency during the time period studied. *The Sacramento Bee* trailed behind with a median of nine articles (see *Figure 4*). The *Los Angeles Times* produced the lowest median number of news articles per 50,000 state employees (4). These results are particularly interesting because of the intra-state contrast, given that the outlets have the exact same potential material to cover.

The *Los Angeles Times* produced 56 percent less news than its competitor, *The Sacramento Bee*. In Pennsylvania, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* produced 46 percent fewer articles than *The Patriot-News*. Both *The Sacramento Bee* and *The Patriot-News* are capital-based papers. Therefore, among other explanations, it could be the case that they produce more in-depth news because they have more proximate access to entities with power in state government.

The two outlets in Florida produced similar amounts of coverage, but, unlike in California and Pennsylvania, Florida's capital-based *Tallahassee Democrat* did not produce more news than the *Tampa Bay Times*.

Figure 4. Median News Articles per 50,000 State Employees, 2005-14

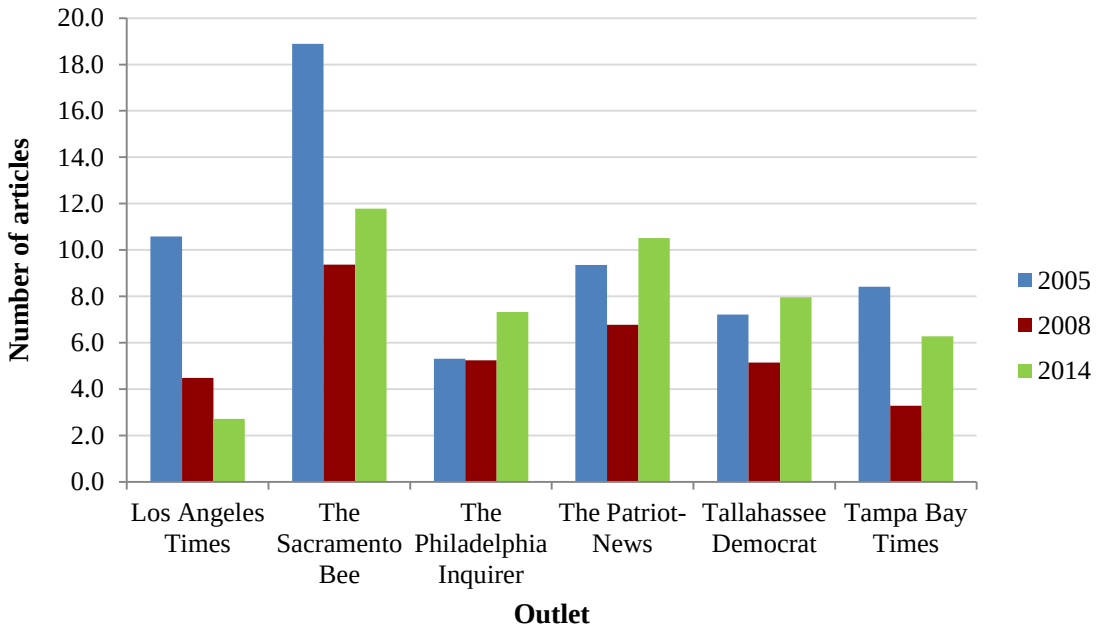


Despite the variation in the number of articles produced, the outlets experienced similar fluctuations in production over the study period. Each newspaper had a drop in production from 2005-08, and all but the *Los Angeles Times* saw an increase from 2008-14 (see *Figure 5*). These findings support the notion that newspapers had difficulty sustaining production of in-depth news content related to state government during the recession.

The results could point to a potential recovery at the latter end of the study period; however, by 2014, only two of six publications had recovered to their pre-recession levels of in-depth news production, after adjusting for size of government. The *Tallahassee Democrat* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* produced the same or more in-depth news articles in 2014 as in 2005. These figures are close, but not in exact agreement with the findings on unadjusted in-depth coverage that were discussed earlier in *C1*.

According to the data discussed in *C1*, *The Patriot-News* had also recovered with the *Tallahassee Democrat* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. However, adjusted data for *The Patriot-News* reveal that while it did meet or surpass its pre-recession production peak from 2007-13, a drop occurred in the final year of the study that brought it below peak once again.

Figure 5. News Articles per 50,000 State Employees, 2005-14

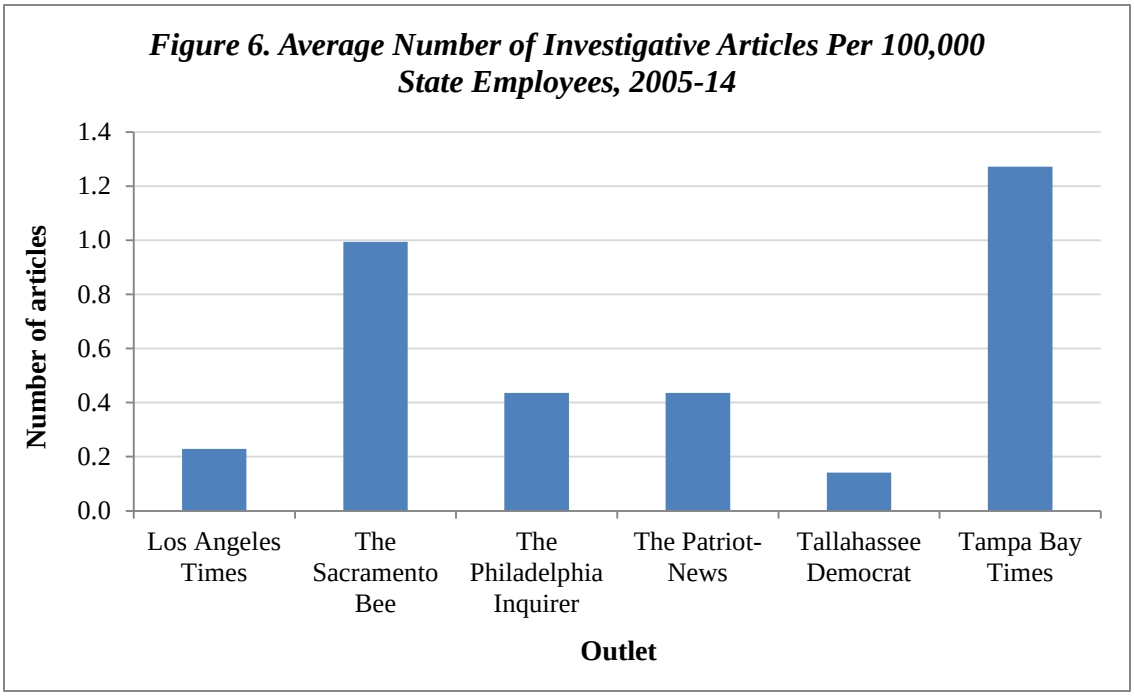


The outlets also varied widely on the amount of investigative articles they produced, when the average[15] was normalized to account for differences in the size of state government (see *Figure 6*). At the highest end of the range, the *Tampa Bay Times* produced an average of 1.3 investigative articles per 100,000 state employees; while its competitor to the north, the *Tallahassee Democrat*, published almost none (0.1). One

[15] A median was used to calculate the number of in-depth news articles per year to temper the effect of outliers. An average was used to calculate the number of investigative articles per year because no such outliers were present.

potential reason for the *Tampa Bay Times*' relatively large amount of investigative coverage is that its statehouse bureau was combined with the *Miami Herald*'s in 2008, which may have offered increased capacity and resources for investigative stories on state government entities.

Figure 6. Average Number of Investigative Articles Per 100,000 State Employees, 2005-14

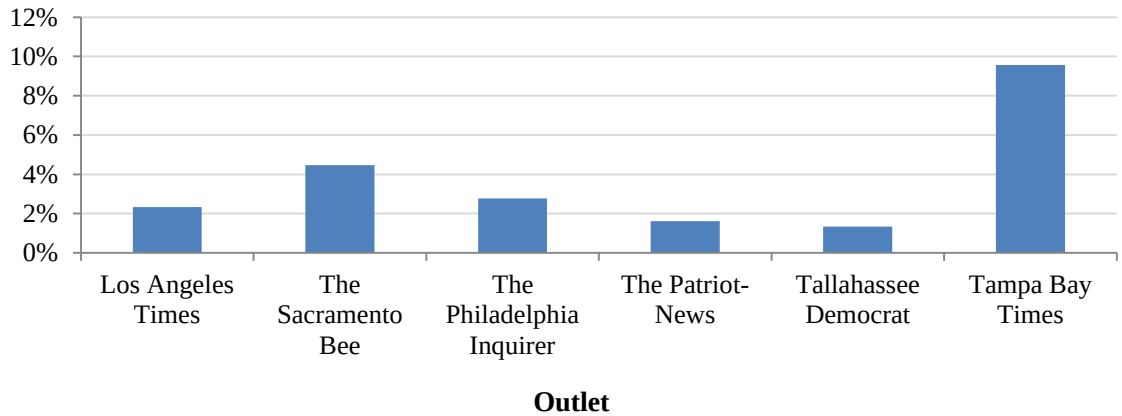


Again, there were notable differences between outlets in the same states. The *Los Angeles Times* produced 80 percent fewer investigative articles on state government, on average, than *The Sacramento Bee*, and the *Tallahassee Democrat* produced 92 percent less investigative coverage, on average, than the *Tampa Bay Times*. In Pennsylvania, *The Patriot-News* and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* produced an equal amount of investigative articles. When looking at the amount of investigative coverage produced by outlet, there are no obvious differences in production between capital- and non-capital-based papers.

By 2014, five out of the six outlets[16] failed to produce the same amount of investigative articles as they did during their pre-recession peaks, when adjusted to account for the varying size of their respective state governments. These results are in agreement with the findings on non-adjusted investigative coverage that were discussed earlier in *C2*, and they could suggest that publications were still struggling to produce the same strength of content that they did before the recession.

Compared to the other publications, another way that the *Tampa Bay Times* stands out is in the large share of news that investigative journalism represents (see *Figure 7*). Overall, investigative coverage comprised nearly 10 percent off all in-depth news coverage from the *Tampa Bay Times*. The next closest outlet was *The Sacramento Bee*, with investigative articles representing 4 percent of news coverage.

Figure 7. Investigative Coverage as a Share of News by Outlet



As the literature details, investigative articles are resource-intensive and take much more time to produce than a standard news article. With this in mind, one would

[16] As with the finding in *C2*, the *Tampa Bay Times*' adjusted investigative coverage did recover to its pre-recession peak.

expect investigative coverage to comprise a minority—though, again, no composition benchmark exists—of an outlet's substantive news. However, *Figure 7* shows that in some publications, investigative journalism does represent a higher share of news than in others.

Each outlet demonstrated clear variation in the amount of investigative coverage it produced as a share of news over the time period studied (See *Appendix E*). For example, *The Sacramento Bee's* share ranged from 2 percent in 2002 to 11 percent in 2010, and it continued to experience swings in production through the end of 2014. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was the only outlet to exhibit a steady trend: Its production of investigative coverage as a share of news peaked in 2005 at 12 percent and, with few exceptions, declined over the remainder of the study period.

There are several factors that could explain this variation. For example, some of the outlets could have focused their investigative coverage on local topics; this thesis' sample only included investigative articles directly related to state government. One theory explained in the literature review suggests that some newspapers, at the risk of losing a larger audience, shifted the focus of coverage towards their immediate, surrounding communities in order to retain that readership during the downturn.

Additionally, this sample only captures investigative articles that were published; investigative stories that were pursued—still requiring dedicated resources—but not completed are not captured. The outlets' unique histories and ownership structures may also play a role in the variation. For example, the *Tampa Bay Times* has been independently owned since its inception in the late 1880s, which perhaps helped to cultivate an especially intrepid, investigative culture.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Through a systematic content analysis of more than 4,000 articles from six U.S. newspapers, this thesis aimed to bolster the literature currently available on how the strength of news fared during the last decade with empirical data. As has been mentioned throughout the preceding chapters, this thesis has limitations that should be considered when reflecting on its findings.

Limitations

Outlet sampling. Systematic random sampling was used to select articles, reducing the original total of articles to one-fifth. This was necessary for coding feasibility. However, the relatively small sample is problematic for capturing a reliable count of investigative stories, which are inherently less-common than in-depth articles overall.

Additionally, the sample was limited to print coverage from six U.S. newspapers in three states. Therefore, the results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to the entire news industry.

Timeframe. The study period was constrained to 2005-14. While a 10-year time period is lengthy, this thesis does not offer information on the amount of in-depth news or investigative reporting before 2005 or after 2014.

Medium. This study focused on print coverage only. While print remains the primary source of original reporting and news consumption, it is possible that the findings overstate erosion in in-depth reporting and investigative journalism if this type of coverage was published but was only available online. This thesis assumed that in-depth reporting and investigative journalism were significant enough that outlets would

likely include such stories in print editions, even in cases where pieces first appeared online. Future research could broaden this analysis by including print and online news content.

Coding parameters. As previously mentioned, articles coded as news were not also coded for their relevancy to state government. This limitation was mitigated, however, by using search terms targeted specifically towards state government coverage.

Investigative reporting was only included if it focused on an entity with power in state government. Newspapers may have dedicated resources towards investigative coverage of local governments or private businesses—and in fact, several such investigations were included in the sample—but those stories were not captured in this thesis. Future research could expand the scope and evaluate newspapers' investigative coverage of other entities beyond state government.

This research also relied on journalists to make explicit mention of their extra reporting effort within a given article in order for it to be coded as investigative. While this self-promotion is common journalistic practice, there is the potential that articles of an investigative nature were not captured in this analysis because they did not include an explicit mention.

Qualitative gaps. This analysis is purely quantitative. There were countless differences amongst the articles coded as in-depth and/or investigative related to the range of reporting practices employed. Certainly some articles were more in-depth or more investigative than others, but assessing the degree to which these qualities existed in a given article was outside the scope of this research. Future research could incorporate a qualitative assessment of the in-depth news and investigative articles identified.

Despite these limitations, this thesis meets its objective by helping to answer a key overarching question: How, if at all, did the nature of news content change during the transformational era of 2005 through 2014?

Key Takeaways

With a focus specifically on state government reporting, the analysis found that both in-depth news and investigative reporting suffered during the 10-year study period. Across the six outlets, collective in-depth news coverage declined by 30 percent from 2005-14, hitting its trough in 2008, with only 201 news articles. The analysis also revealed that, over the study period, half of the outlets experienced three or more consecutive years without any investigative coverage on state government.

By 2014, neither in-depth reporting nor investigative coverage had recovered to their pre-recession production levels. These findings support literature that says the recent collapse of the legacy news institutions has resulted in diminished coverage for citizens. The study discovered that although both recoveries were weak, investigative reporting appeared to recover at a slower rate than in-depth reporting. Whereas by 2014 half of the outlets had recovered to their pre-recession peaks in production of in-depth news coverage, investigative coverage had recovered at only one. This could indicate that newspapers experience additional challenges in producing investigative coverage at the levels they once did, more so than in producing other types of coverage.

This analysis also identified a positive correlation, overall, between the number of news reporters on a given publication's staff and the amount of investigative coverage it produced. This finding could give credence to the argument that a well-staffed newsroom produces more investigative coverage.

Lastly, by adjusting the data to account for differences in the size of each outlet's respective state government, this research made "apples-to-apples" comparisons of the publications' respective output. Through this lens, the analysis found wide variation in the amount of investigative and in-depth news coverage produced by each outlet, even between intra-state publications.

When adjusted, the capital-based newspapers in California and Pennsylvania produced more in-depth state government news articles per 50,000 state employees than their in-state competitors, but fewer investigative pieces. This finding is surprising considering that capital-based publications presumably have greater access to state government events and officials.

Despite these differences, the outlets did experience similar fluctuations in production over the study period. Each newspaper had a drop in production from 2005-08, and all but one saw an increase from 2008-14. These findings support the notion that newspapers had particular difficulty sustaining production of in-depth news content related to state government during the recession.

These trends signal more than the loss of ink on a page: They point to lighter scrutiny of public actors in state capitols during a time of important state policymaking. With Congress gridlocked and expensive to lobby, national advocacy organizations have increasingly turned their attention to states, perhaps calculating that more can be done for a lower price tag and with less probing by the press. Policy decisions made at the state level can have dramatic and direct effects on the daily lives of residents—underscoring the need for a dogged watchdog that can hold those with power to account.

A historic and valued role of the press has been to monitor those with power on behalf of the public. Unfortunately, this research finds that, on average, the six outlets studied barely produced one investigative article focused on state government per 100,000 state employees each year. Considering that the watchdog function of the press remains one of the most highly regarded by the public, one could argue that newspapers—especially those struggling to retain and obtain subscribers—stand to benefit from producing more coverage of an investigative nature.

The findings of this analysis join a wealth of other literature in showing how the financial and economic turmoil of the last decade took a toll on journalists' capacity to produce substantive news. In-depth news and investigative coverage requires well-staffed and well-supported newsrooms, making this important work particularly vulnerable during hard times. As the news industry—and indeed the country—continues to navigate a new and uncertain media landscape, the responsibility to support strong news coverage rests with all of us. No less than the vitality and wellbeing of our democracy depends on it. Therefore, it must be a collective decision to prioritize and to regularly evaluate the strength of journalism in America.

In his remarks at the 2016 Toner Award ceremony, which honors reporters for excellence in political reporting, President Barack Obama reflected on what is required to make the country's system of self-government effective. Speaking of journalism, he said, "…this is as important to making it work as anything—people getting information that they can trust, and that has substance and evidence and facts and truth behind it" (The White House, 2016, para.33). Decades from now, he said, people seeking to understand this time will look for "the smartest investigative journalism that told our story and lifted

up the contradictions in our societies, and asked the hard questions, and forced people to see the truth even when it was uncomfortable" (The White House, 2016, para. 34).

By providing a baseline understanding of how statehouse journalism fared over the last decade in three large U.S. states, this research calls attention to a critical question: When the Fourth Estate, a principal fulcrum on which the country's balance of power resets, grows weaker, who gets stronger?

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Appendices

Appendix A. Nexis Search Terms by Outlet

The *Los Angeles Times*
LENGTH(>1000) AND "Sacramento" AND "legislature" OR "bill" OR "statute" OR "budget" OR "law" OR "representative" OR "senator" OR "committee" OR "governor" OR "assembly" OR "committee" AND NOT("obituary" or "obituaries")

The Sacramento Bee
LENGTH(>1000) AND "Sacramento" AND "legislature" OR "bill" OR "statute" OR "budget" OR "law" OR "representative" OR "senator" OR "committee" OR "governor" OR "assembly" OR "committee" AND NOT("obituary" or "obituaries")

The *Tampa Bay Times*
LENGTH(>1000) AND "Tallahassee" AND "legislature" OR "bill" OR "statute" OR "budget" OR "law" OR "representative" OR "senator" OR "committee" OR "governor" OR "assembly" OR "committee" AND NOT("obituary" or "obituaries") AND NOT HEADLINE("clubs and organizations") AND NOT HEADLINE("author biographies") AND NOT HEADLINE("THE BUZZ: FLORIDA POLITICS") AND NOT HEADLINE("THE BUZZ: ON FLORIDA POLITICS") AND NOT HEADLINE("high fives") AND NOT HEADLINE("Bay buzz") AND NOT HEADLINE("briefly") AND NOT HEADLINE("real estate transactions") AND NOT HEADLINE("health and support") AND NOT HEADLINE("crime report")

The *Tallahassee Democrat*
LENGTH(>1000) AND "Tallahassee" AND "legislature" OR "bill" OR "statute" OR "budget" OR "law" OR "representative" OR "senator" OR "committee" OR "governor" OR "assembly" OR "committee" AND NOT("obituary" or "obituaries") AND NOT HEADLINE("NIGHTLIFE (PART 1)") AND NOT HEADLINE("health calendar") AND NOT HEADLINE("prep roundup") AND NOT HEADLINE("heads up") AND NOT HEADLINE("fine wines") AND NOT HEADLINE("EXHIBITS;Ongoing exhibits") AND NOT HEADLINE("before you go") AND NOT HEADLINE("scoreboard") AND NOT HEADLINE("local briefs") AND NOT HEADLINE("nightlife (part 2)") AND NOT HEADLINE("calendar") AND NOT HEADLINE("at the movies") AND NOT HEADLINE("hot tickets") AND NOT HEADLINE("potpourri") AND NOT HEADLINE("Limelight Extra; Movies") AND NOT HEADLINE("Nightlife; TODAY") AND NOT HEADLINE("Calendar; TODAY") AND NOT HEADLINE("Your Health Care; ACUPUNCTURE") AND NOT HEADLINE("DENTISTRY; DENTISTRY") AND NOT HEADLINE("GASTROENTEROLOGY; GASTROENTEROLOGY") AND

NOT HEADLINE(“MASSAGE; MASSAGE”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Exhibits; EVENTS”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Limelight Extra; Movies”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“@ The Movies With Mark Hinson”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Sunday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Monday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Tuesday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Wednesday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Thursday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Friday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Saturday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Sunday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Sunday letters”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“Calendar; TODAY”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“the week ahead”)

The Philadelphia Inquirer

LENGTH(>1000) AND "Harrisburg" AND "legislature" OR "bill" OR "statute" OR "budget" OR "law" OR "representative" OR "senator" OR "committee" OR "governor" OR "assembly" OR "committee" AND NOT("obituary" or "obituaries") AND NOT HEADLINE("Metropolitan area news in brief") AND NOT HEADLINE("business news in brief") AND NOT HEADLINE("dialogue") AND NOT HEADLINE("on the boards")

The Patriot-News

LENGTH(>1000) AND "Harrisburg" AND "legislature" OR "bill" OR "statute" OR "budget" OR "law" OR "representative" OR "senator" OR "committee" OR "governor" OR "assembly" OR "committee" AND NOT("obituary" or "obituaries") AND NOT HEADLINE("in your school") AND NOT HEADLINE("community calendar") AND NOT HEADLINE("births") AND NOT HEADLINE("courts") AND NOT HEADLINE("calendar”) AND NOT HEADLINE("comparing views") AND NOT HEADLINE("class reunions”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“police roundup”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“real estate news”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“County court”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“trade talk”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“municipal roundup”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“public notices”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“religion calendar”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“awards”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“private school roundup”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“regional calendar”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“school roundup”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“horoscope”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“events”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“music”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“go express”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“talk of the town”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“nightspots”) AND NOT HEADLINE(“your view”)

Appendix B. Coding Guide

(All variables required)

1. **Coder identification**
   John=1
   Sarah=2
   Matt=3
   Lauren=4

2. **State**
   Which state is the article from? Select one.
   - 1 – California
   - 2 – Pennsylvania
   - 3 – Florida
   - 99 – Unclear/Other

3. **Outlet**
   Which newspaper is the article from? Select one.
   - 1 – The Sacramento Bee (CA)
   - 2 – The Los Angeles Times (CA)
   - 3 – The Patriot-News (PA)
   - 4 – The Philadelphia Inquirer (PA)
   - 5 – The Tallahassee Democrat (FL)
   - 6 – The Tampa Bay Times/The St. Petersburg Times (FL)
   - 99 – Unclear/Other

4. **Article month**
   In which month was the article published? Write out the full month (e.g. January, February, March, etc.)

5. **Article year**
   In which year was the article published? Use format: YYYY

6. **Article headline**
   Copy and paste the article's full headline. (Nexis automatically bolds the entire headline.)

7. **Article length**

How many words (not characters) are in the article? When available, use the count from Nexis. Enter in numerical format (e.g. 2423).

8. Article type

Which type of article is it? Select one.

- 1 – News: has an author and does not include the writer's opinion, usually has a dateline (e.g. Tallahassee—)
- 2 – Editorial: No author listed, is written by the newspaper, consists of the newspaper's opinion/position
- 3 – Column: The author is employed by the newspaper; you may have to research this. The column topic should be related to hard-news; select 99 for soft-news columns such as travel features, personal Q&As, etc. Select 3 for opinion pieces by someone employed at the paper.
- 4 – Associated Press or other wire service story, or other outlets like NYT, WaPo, etc.
- 5 – Letter to the editor: a letter sent to a newspaper about issues of concern from its readers; an opinion piece submitted by a reader and not someone who is employed by the newspaper
- 6 – Op-ed: expresses the opinions of a named author who is not affiliated with the publication's editorial board, including an elected official, a professional leader, etc. This includes community contributors and also captures freelance work.
- 99 – Unclear/Other. Choose 99 for soft-news features and/or reviews of products/experiences/events, travel features, personal Q&As, sports event previews or recaps. Also includes calendar listings or miscellaneous.

If you choose 4-99, please skip to the end & begin coding a new article.

9. Byline

If the article has a byline, copy and paste in the reporter's full name.

- Leave the cell blank if there is no byline.
- If there is more than one reporter listed in the byline, copy and paste only one name into one cell, and use the additional columns provided in the Excel sheet.
- Do not include the reporter's title information

10. Investigative

Is the article investigative according to the criteria below?

For an article to be considered investigative, it must include time-intensive work formally conducted by the journalist that supports and/or enforces a critique of an entity with power in state government.

To determine if an article is investigative, follow these steps:

Step 1) Read the headline. If any of the following are true, then the article is more likely to be investigative:

a. The headline indicates potential wrongdoing by an entity with power in state government.
b. The headline indicates that the article will critique an entity with power in state government.
c. The headline indicates that the article is negative coverage of an entity with power in state government.

Step 2) Read the first paragraph (or a few of the first paragraphs). If any of the following are true, then the article is more likely to be investigative:

d. The first paragraph(s) includes an anecdote or narrative that is negative, disturbing, or seemingly intended to inspire outrage or other strong emotions in the reader.
e. The first paragraph(s) describes potential wrongdoing by an entity with power in state government.
f. The first paragraph(s) indicates that the focus of the article is a critique of an entity with power in state government.

Numbers 1 and 2 (above) will help you determine whether the article is a negative critique of someone with power in state government, but they are not foolproof. You should skim or read the article to determine if, in fact, the article is a negative critique of an entity with power in state government. For another way to determine if the article includes a negative critique, you can ask yourself the following questions:

- Would this type of coverage prevent another state actor from exhibiting similar behavior in the future?
- Would this type of coverage prompt the criticized subject to change or reevaluate their actions/statements/etc.?
- If I were the subject in the story, would I view the coverage as unfavorable?

Importantly, a negative critique of an entity with power in state government is not enough on its own to consider the article as investigative. The article must be a negative critique and include time-intensive work by the journalist that supports/enforces the critique. To

determine whether the journalist conducted time-intensive work, follow step number 3 (below):

Step 3) Determine whether the newspaper is explicitly mentioned within the article as conducting time-intensive and analytical work. (The newspaper titles have been manually highlighted within all articles.)

- Time-intensive work was formally conducted by the journalist if the article explicitly states that the publication:
    - Obtained records;
    - Conducted a review, investigation, or analysis of records, interviews, financial statements, etc.;
    - Conducted a data analysis.

Note: Detailed histories and extensive interviews may not be investigative if there is no original analysis contributed by the reporter.

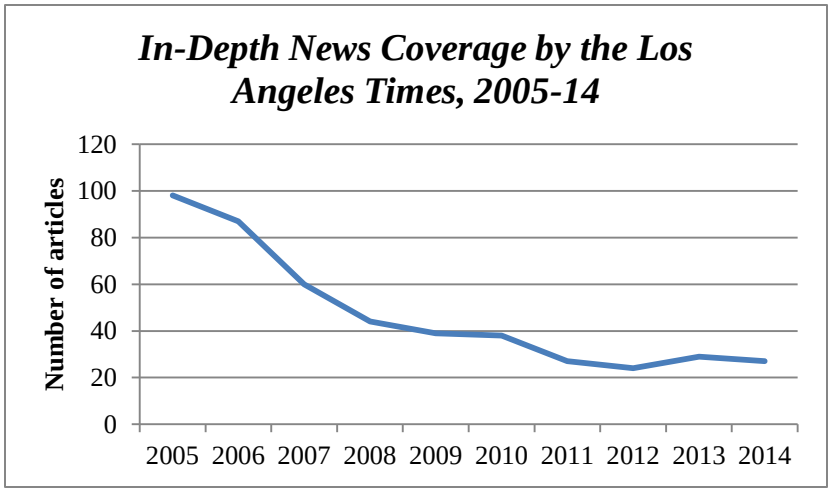
If the article includes explicit mention of time-intensive work formally conducted by the journalist AND that work supports and/or enforces a critique of an entity with power in state government, then select option 1 below.

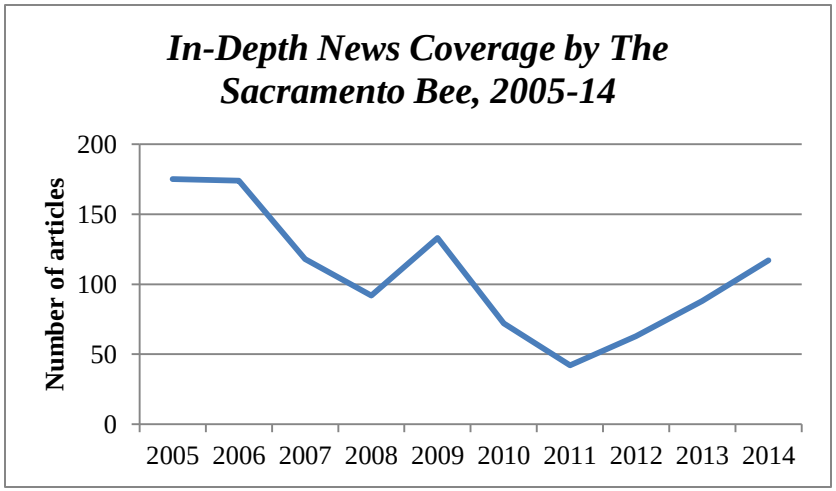
If the article mentions a previous investigation conducted by the outlet, and if there is no new investigative substance in the article, select option 2 below.

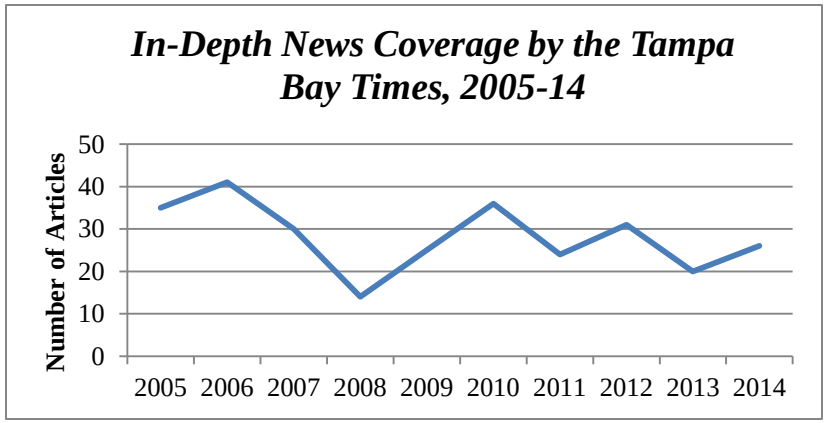
To what degree was the article investigative?

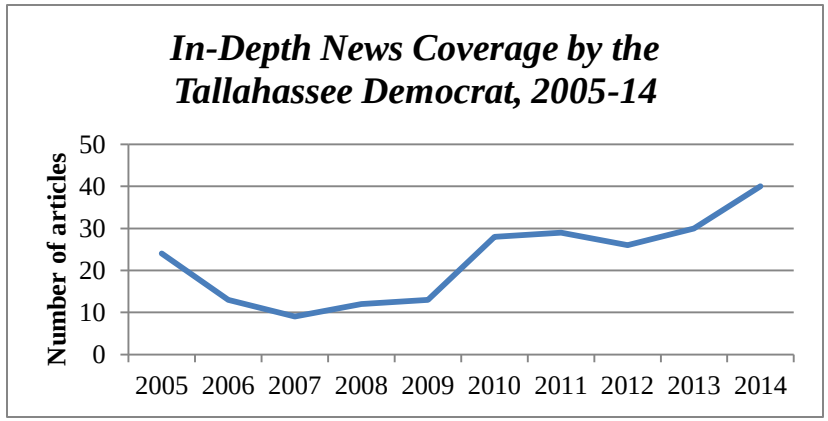
- 1 – The article is investigative because it includes a negative critique of an entity with power in state government AND there is explicit mention of the publication conducting time-intensive work.
- 2 – The article includes a negative critique of an entity with power in state government, and it relies on research from a previous investigative article by the same publication, but it does not include new investigation.
- 3 – The article is not investigative.
- 99 – Unclear/Other

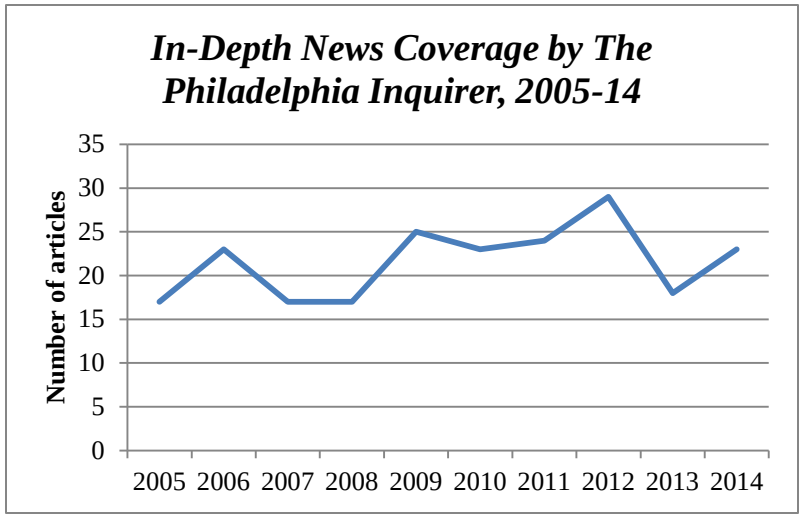
Appendix C. In-Depth News Coverage by Outlet

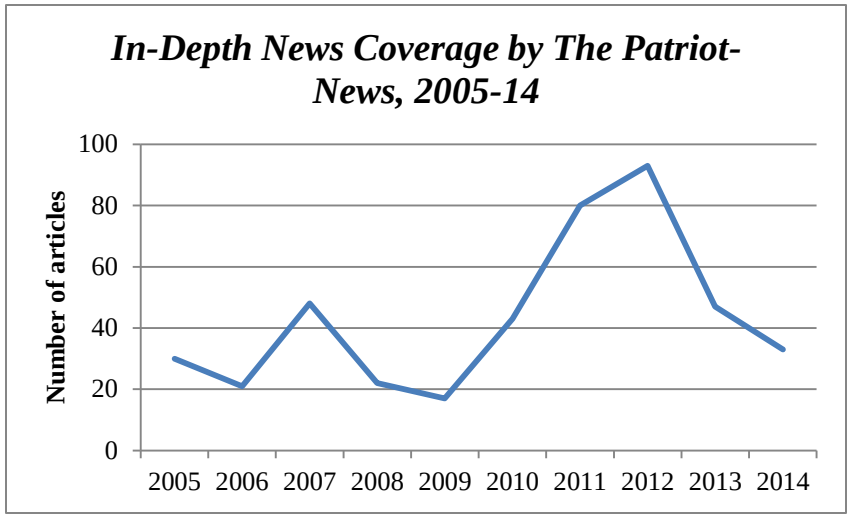




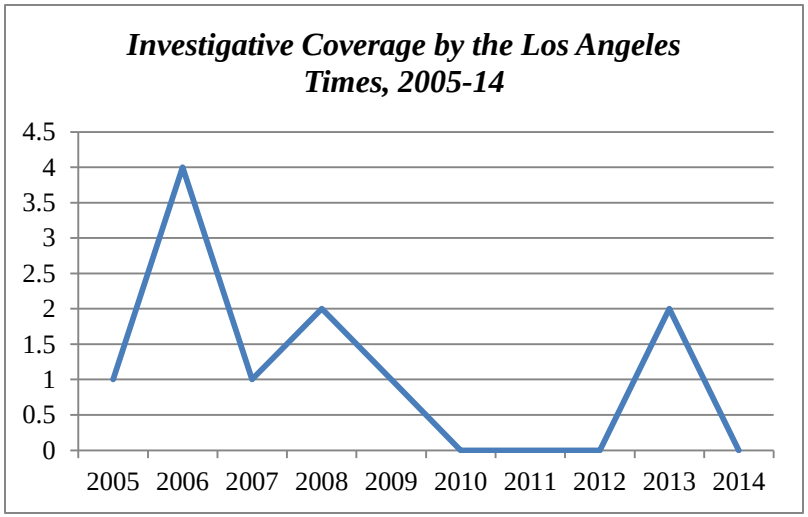


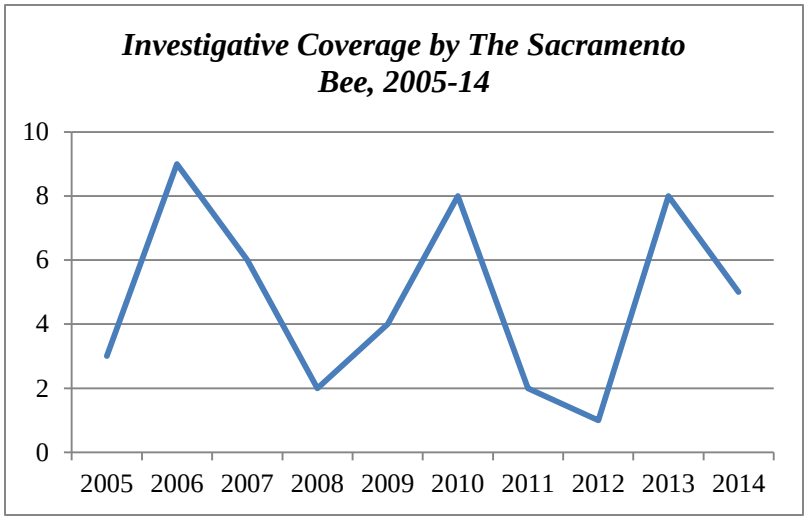


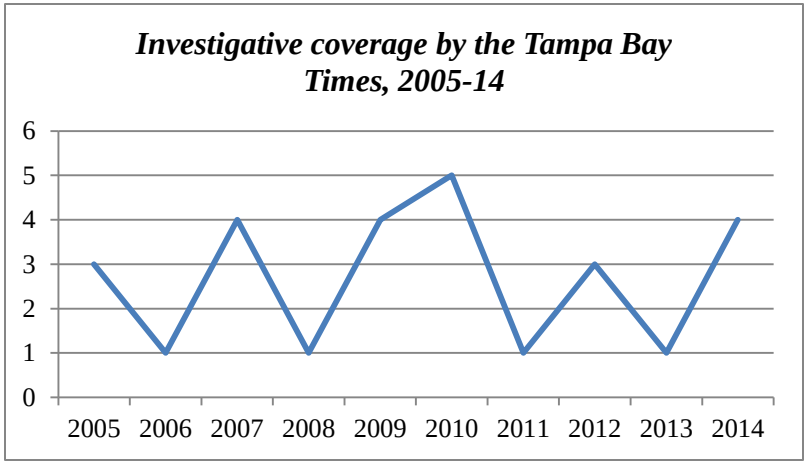

In-Depth News Coverage by The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2005-14
Number of articles
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

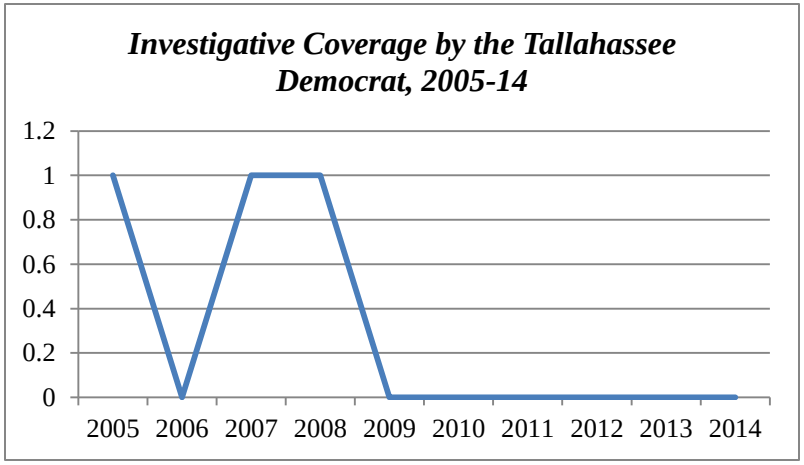

In-Depth News Coverage by The Patriot-News, 2005-14
Number of articles
100
80
60
40
20
0
2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

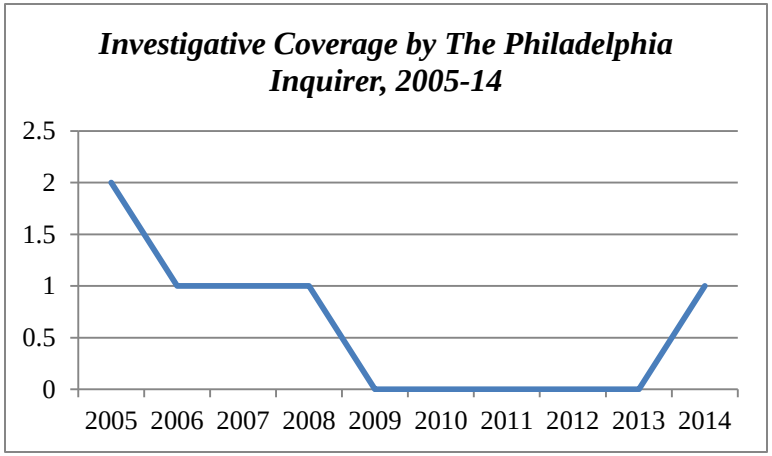
Appendix D. Investigative Coverage by Outlet, 2005-14

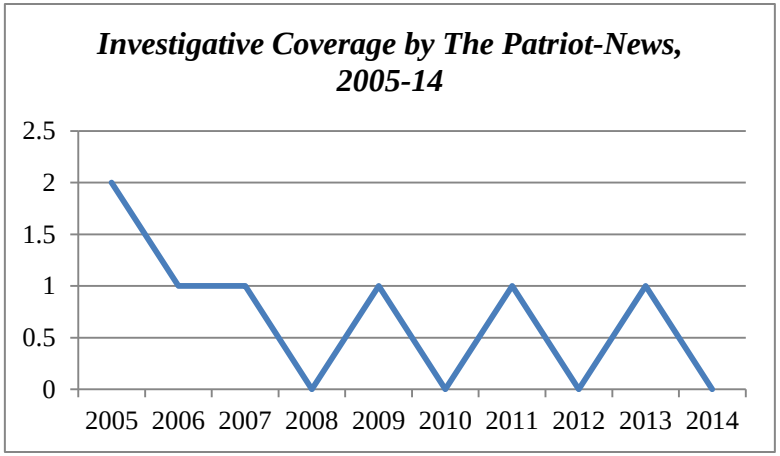




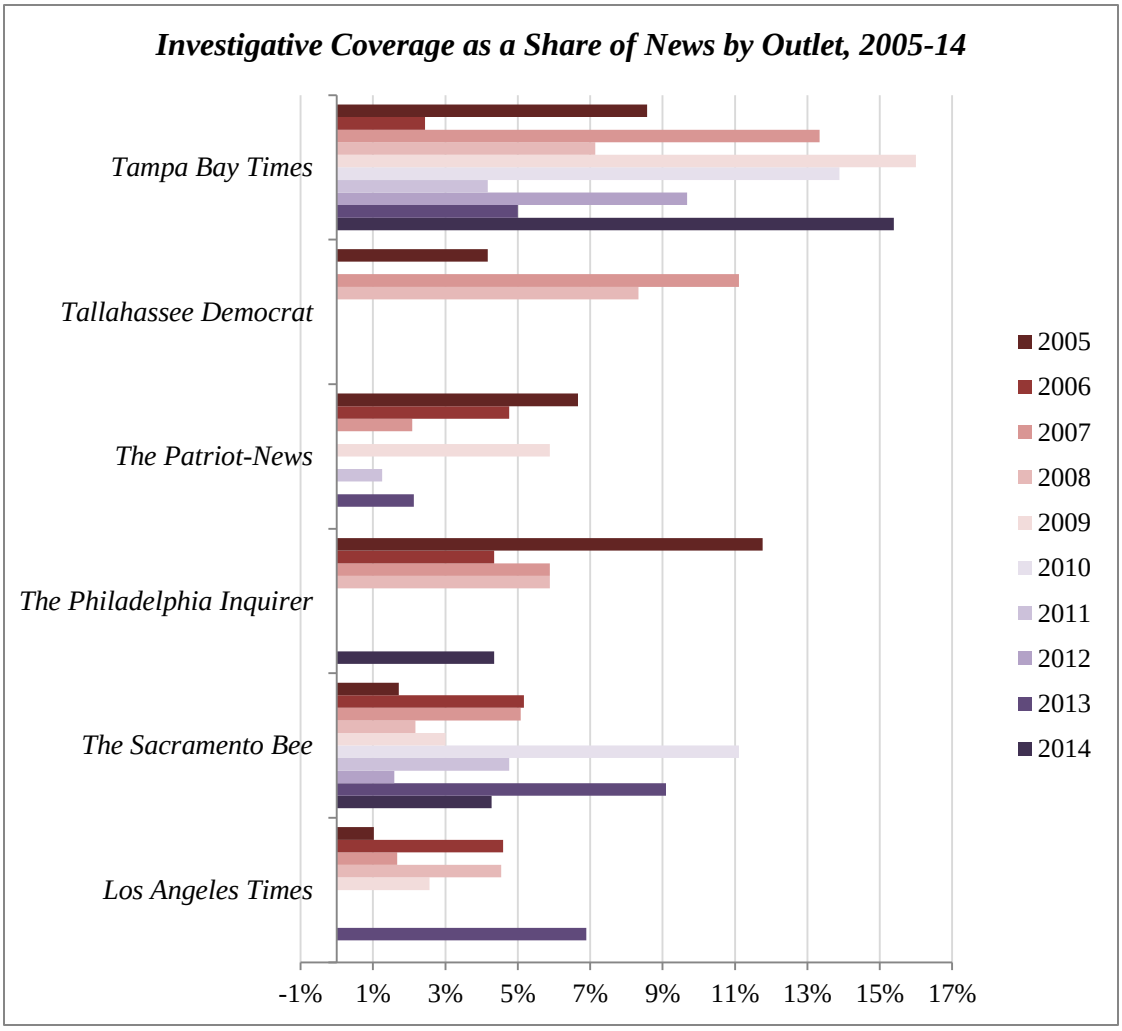





Investigative Coverage by The Philadelphia Inquirer, 2005-14
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014


Investigative Coverage by The Patriot-News, 2005-14
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
2005 2006 2007 2008 2009 2010 2011 2012 2013 2014

Appendix E. Investigative Coverage as a Share of News by Outlet, 2005-14



Investigative Coverage as a Share of News by Outlet, 2005-14										
	2005	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**	**2013**	**2014**
Tampa Bay Times	9%	2%	13%	7%	16%	14%	4%	10%	5%	15%
Tallahassee Democrat	4%	0%	11%	8%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
The Patriot-News	7%	5%	2%	0%	6%	0%	1%	0%	2%	0%
The Philadelphia Inquirer	12%	4%	6%	6%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	4%
The Sacramento Bee	2%	5%	5%	2%	3%	11%	5%	2%	9%	4%
Los Angeles Times	1%	5%	2%	5%	3%	0%	0%	0%	7%	0%