

College Media's Reflection of Society

Introduction

The proliferation of media sources in America's market-oriented system has led to an increase in the amount of news disseminated to the public over the past few decades. However, increasing market pressures have facilitated the rise of soft news supplied to the public as a means of news producers maximizing audience size, thus leading to greater profits. This can be seen very clearly in the rise of "infotainment" and personalized news. Rather than focusing on hard news topics, such as public policy and social issues, media sources have placed emphasis on soft news topics such as sex, sleaze, scandal, and lifestyle. This shift in news "type" has marked a change in the focus by the media in order to meet market demands, and this issue of "market failures" has been increasingly discussed among scholars.

The type of media system found in a country plays a large role in the creation of media market failures. One specific market failure created by the market-oriented media system in the United States involves the concept of rational ignorance. The argument is that consumers realize that their individual vote does not make a difference and are therefore disinterested in politics (Hamilton). In this sense, the average consumer of media in the United States is more interested in soft than hard news. However, the democratic ideal of informed citizenship requires that media sources provide at least a minimal level of hard news coverage in order to keep the public informed of major issues. While the United States supports a private, market-oriented system based on profit, other countries, mostly found in Europe, have implemented a public broadcast

system. This idea of public broadcasting challenges the rational ignorance theory by creating a situation known as the “inadvertent audience,” (Iyengar and Hahn) in which consumers of media, regardless of their demand for substantive news, are exposed to hard news programming by public broadcasters.

Even though the American media market has become saturated with soft news due to market demands, certain media sources exist within the system that serve as public broadcasters. The major public broadcaster in the United States is the Public Broadcast Service, PBS. This government-sponsored media outlet serves the role that public broadcasters do in other western democracies in Europe. However, it has a very small market share. In the print sector, college and university newspapers may act as public broadcasters in the sense that they are subsidized by college administrations making it possible for the journalists to ignore audience demand and report on hard news.

University newspapers can function as public broadcasters in the following ways: 1) College newspapers are subsidized by the university regardless of the readership levels and other market based factors. 2) College newspapers are a free source to their readers and are perceived to provide substantial news to college students. 3) College newspapers are perceived to provide varied news coverage on major issues both on the campus, local, and national level. For these reasons, this paper will assess the extent to which university newspapers function in similar ways to public broadcasters.

Research Question and Hypothesis

This study will focus on the potential to create an informed audience through print media on college campuses. Citizens come of voting age at the same time that they enter into college, and previous research has emphasized the “knowledge gap” created by

differing levels of education among citizens, especially between countries that utilize different media systems. However, most newspaper outlets on college campuses may function as public broadcasters, and therefore, may provide more substantive news compared to other non-campus outlets in the United States, which would have to rely on soft news due to market pressures. Treating university newspapers as public print media, the question becomes: do university newspapers provide a significantly greater amount of hard news than other market-oriented newspapers within the United States? Within media systems, it is argued that public broadcasting systems generally provide a larger amount of substantive news than market-oriented systems due to subsidies provided by the state. If this is the case, college newspapers should outperform the standard, privately owned print media source. In order to answer this question, the content and “type” of news in university newspapers need to be compared to the content of leading national newspapers.

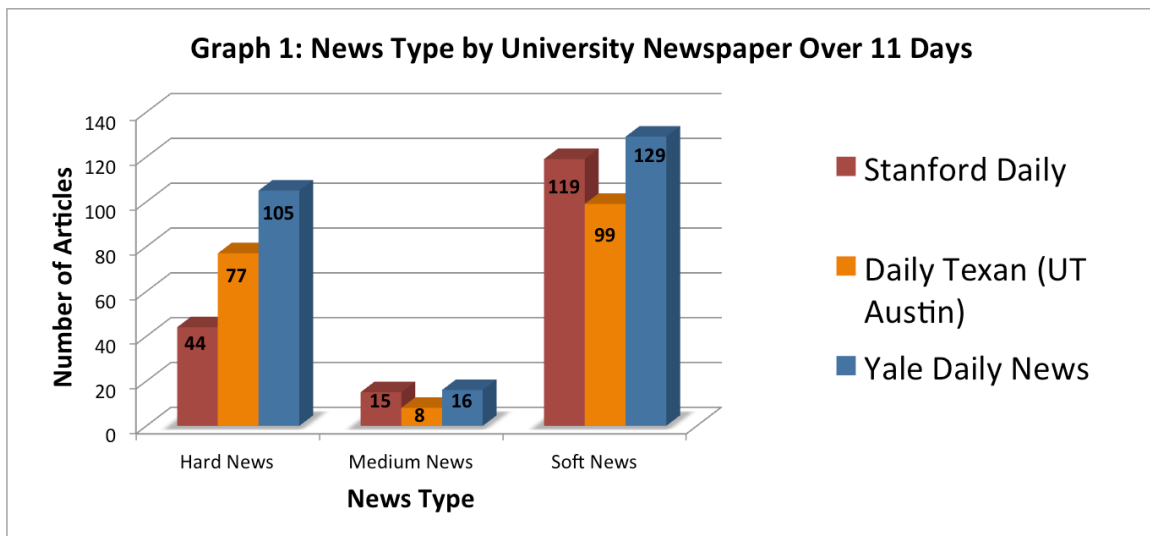
Methodology

In this study, three college newspapers, the *Stanford Daily*, the *Daily Texan*, and the *Yale Daily News*, were coded over an 11-day period (not including weekends). The coding was conducted from Friday, January 30th through Friday, February 13th. Each article in the newspaper was coded on a scale from -1 to +1, with the levels corresponding to “soft”, “medium”, and “hard” news. Coding these college newspapers during the same time period would allow for an accurate comparison of the percentages of news types published. Since each newspaper would have access to the same current and global events during this period, this protects against the possibility for variance in news type due to changing current events.

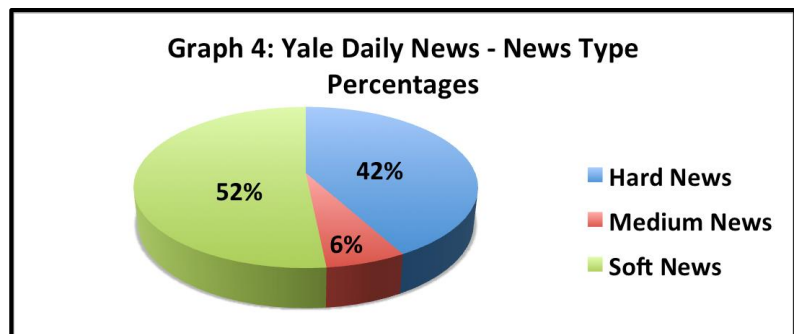
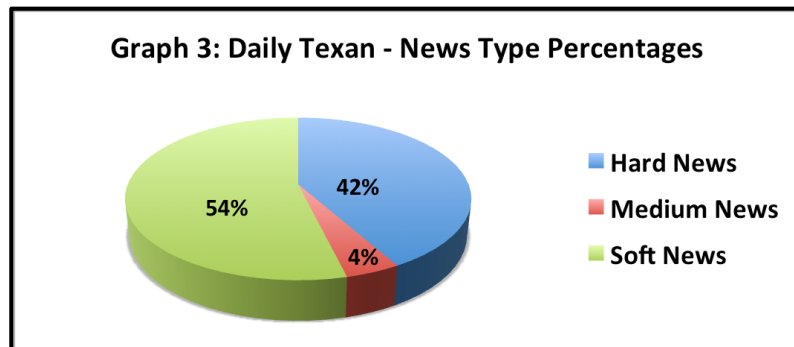
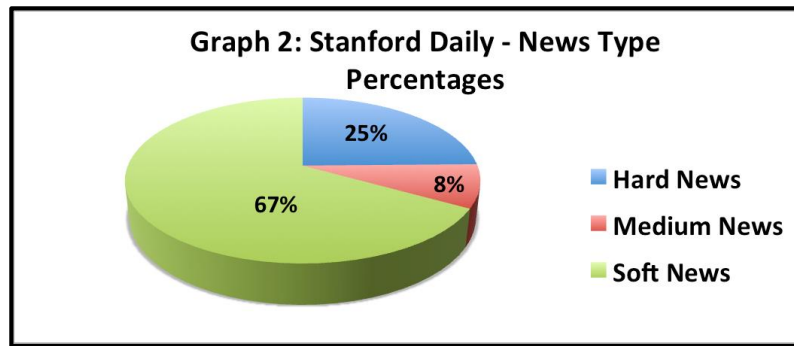
Next, two national newspapers, the New York Times and USA Today, were coded over a five day period (Monday February 16th through Friday February 20th). Again each article in the newspaper was coded on a scale from -1 to +1 to correspond with the three levels of news type. Coding these national newspapers provides a reference point for assessing the performance of college newspapers. In doing so, the study will focus on the amounts of news type provided by different, prestigious university newspapers and then compare them to a national standard set by the New York Times and USA Today.

Results

Table 1: News Type by University Newspaper (Jan 30 – Feb 13)			
	Stanford Daily	Daily Texan (UT Austin)	Yale Daily News
Hard News	44	77	105
Medium News	15	8	16
Soft News	119	99	129
Total Number of Articles	178	184	250



*Study: 4 percent error according to inter-coder reliability test



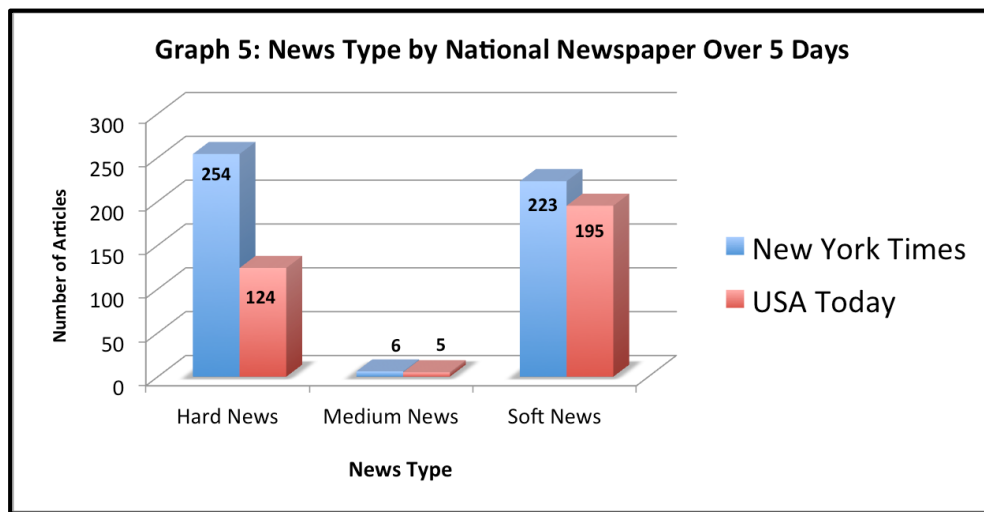
Graph 1 shows that the Stanford Daily, The Daily Texan, and The Yale Daily News differ greatly regarding the amount of hard news provided. The Yale Daily News provided the most hard news articles (105) over this time period, compared to The Daily Texan (77) and The Stanford Daily (44).

Regarding the news type of each article published, Graphs 2, 3, and 4 compare the percentage of news type found in each college newspaper during the period of data collection. While The Daily Texan and The Yale Daily News provided the same percent of hard news (42%) based on the total number of articles, the Stanford Daily provided a

significantly smaller percent of hard news (25%) with a difference of 17 percentage points. This is an interesting finding as it could be argued that Stanford should provide similar amounts of hard news as other “elite” institutions, such as Yale and the University of Texas at Austin. However, the information provides evidence that there is a failure by Stanford Daily to provide parallel amounts of hard news as other rival institutions.

With the knowledge that the three university newspapers provided hard news that ranged from 25% to 42% of the total number of articles published, the study now focuses on the amount of different news types published in national newspapers.

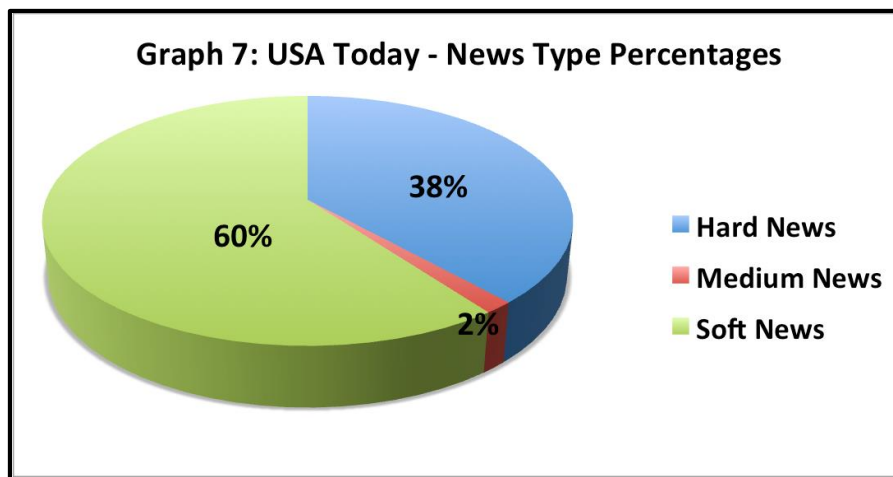
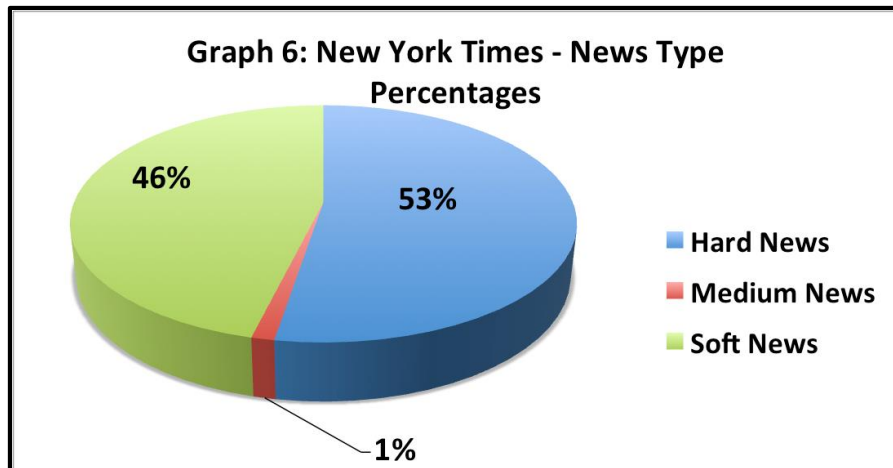
Table 2: News Type by National Newspaper (Feb 16-Feb 20)		
	New York Times	USA Today
Hard News	254	124
Medium News	6	5
Soft News	223	195
Total Number of Articles	483	324



The New York Times and the USA Today also differ greatly in the amount of hard news provided. The New York Times publishes a little more than twice the amount of hard news articles than USA Today (New York Times: 254 - USA Today: 124).

However, there is a significantly smaller variance in the amount of soft news published

by the newspapers during the data collection period, as the New York Times published the most (223) compared to USA Today (195), which is a difference of 28 hard news articles.



Regarding the news type of each article published, Graphs 6 and 7 compare the percentage of news type found in each national newspaper during the period of data collection. Following general beliefs, the New York Times is revealed to be a more “elite publication”, producing about 53% hard news articles out of the total number of articles published. On the other hand, USA Today is shown to follow the tabloid model of national news sources, producing only 38% hard news articles out of the total number of

articles published. Comparatively, this is a difference of 15 percentage points between the two national newspapers.

Table 3: Average Number of Articles for each Newspaper and Percentage of News Type					
	Stanford Daily	Daily Texan	Yale Daily News	USA Today	New York Times
Average Number of Articles per Issue	16.1	16.7	22.7	61.2	96.6
Percent Hard News	25%	42%	42%	38%	53%
Percent Medium News	8%	4%	6%	2%	1%
Percent Soft News	67%	54%	52%	60%	46%

In order to answer the original question of whether or not university newspapers provide a significantly greater amount of hard news than other market-oriented newspapers, the first step is to analyze the average percent of hard news published by each news source. Table 3 shows that the New York Times clearly provided the largest percentage of hard news (53%) compared to the Stanford Daily (25%). When averaged, the public print sources, namely the university newspapers, averaged 36% hard news while the market-oriented newspapers averaged 45.5% hard news. This difference of almost 10 percentage points of hard news provided per publication is a significant difference between the market-oriented and public print systems. However, the Stanford Daily served as an outlier, causing the university newspaper average of hard news to drop from the 42% found in the other two university newspapers.

Regarding the average amount of hard news provided by university versus national newspapers, these findings do not support the hypothesis of this paper, but in terms of individual university newspapers, some performed at the standards set by the national newspapers. For instance, the Yale Daily News and the Daily Texan provided a greater percentage of hard news (42%) as compared to USA Today (38%). However, because the New York Times sets news standards at such a high bar given their resources

and worldwide bureaus, the college newspapers shouldn't be expected to perform at this same caliber.

Discussion

This study shows that even though university newspapers are a subsidized news source, they do not seem to function exactly like public broadcasters. In general, they delivered lower levels of hard news as did credible and nationally acclaimed newspapers. However, in specific cases, the Yale Daily News and the Daily Texan both provided a greater amount of hard news than did USA Today. The importance of this study is that it reveals a unique argument about market failure in regards to university media and the content that is produced by their print publications. While there was a slight variance in the amount of hard news provided by the university newspapers that were tested, their content was comparable to that of USA Today. Understandably, none of the university newspapers provided as high a percentage of hard news as did the New York Times, which is considered an elite publication. Still, two very important points can be taken away from this study.

The first point involves the comparison of the university newspapers to each other. With a data set of information involving the selected college newspapers over 11 days with an average of around 200 articles analyzed for each paper, it can be argued that the data maintains a strong level of credibility with a large sample size. If this is the case, the disparity between the percent of hard news provided by the Stanford Daily compared to the percent of hard news provided by The Daily Texan and the Yale Daily News is a significant finding. Even though Stanford is perceived to be one of the top three premier institutions in the United States, the amount of substantive news provided through the

campus newspaper seems to be inadequate in terms of nurturing the growth of informed citizenship. In these terms, The Stanford Daily does not meet expectations regarding content and news type when compared to the other two campus newspapers selected for this study. Not only is the Stanford Daily the smallest provider in percent of total news per issue, but the newspaper is also the smallest provider of articles per issue (16.1). In terms of college newspapers, the Stanford Daily may be a specific case of a market failure in terms of low levels of hard news content that decreases the promotion of democratic ideals and the informed citizen concept.

A possible explanation for this occurrence is the difference in culture and environment in which these universities are located. The Yale Daily News includes a section that covers hard news topics from other Ivy League campuses, and it also covers a significant amount of hard news topics regarding the city in which it is located in, New Haven. In essence, Yale serves as the center of attention for the city and the university has a strong vested interest in public affairs, as evidenced through the content of its newspaper articles. It is possible that the Yale Daily News' inclusion of such a high percentage of hard news stories might be attributable to this reason. The Daily Texan involves a similar situation. Even though Austin, Texas is a fairly large and dispersed city, the University of Texas at Austin is located in the central part of the city and is integrated into the existing infrastructure. Because of this, the university also has a vested interest in the public issues that both regular citizens and students face. Just like the Yale Daily News, this might be a reason for a relatively high percentage of hard news provided by the Daily Texan. Comparatively, the Stanford Daily includes significantly less hard

news, and one plausible explanation for this is the university's lack of inclusion within the surrounding area.

Among Stanford students exists this notion of "The Stanford Bubble". The Stanford Bubble describes the isolation of the university within its own confines as a means of decreasing student interest in affairs outside of campus. On campus, many sentiments are expressed that most students lack the time to travel off campus. This being the case, an argument could be made that the lack of student interest in public affairs, which is seen in the supply of hard news by the Stanford Daily, can be attributed to the "Stanford Culture" of detachment from the outside world. Interestingly enough, this idea of the lack of interest may tie into notions of rational ignorance theory in that students on the Stanford campus don't find it necessary to be informed of hard, substantial affairs in the outer world simply because the culture of the Stanford bubble has created this. Overall, this argument could be one about a university's integration and inclusion into the surrounding area as determinant of the amount of hard news that is provided by the university newspaper.

The second point to take away from this study includes the comparison of the university newspapers to the market-based newspapers. The argument created in this paper suggests that the public nature of university newspapers led to a greater amount of hard news compared to national, private newspapers. However the findings can be interpreted in two ways. The first being that market-based newspapers provide a greater amount of hard news, in percent of total articles, than does college newspapers. A possible explanation for this is that university newspapers lack the resources to cover large-scale public affairs issues due to smaller levels of funding as compared to privately

owned and established newspapers. Still, the second interpretation can lead to the opposite conclusion. Ignoring the unique case of the Stanford Daily, the Yale Daily News and The Daily Texan provided a greater percentage of hard news than did USA Today, and this proves that university media can be comparable to national print media sources. Again, an explanation for this could be that each university's level of involvement with outside affairs provides the means in which their newspapers cover hard news. This finding is intriguing for the fact that these two university newspapers do a better job at creating an informed citizen than USA Today.

Overall, these findings lead to an ambiguous conclusion. In order to better answer the original question posed in this study, further research could involve the inclusion of a greater number of university newspapers and national newspapers of the same reputational caliber. Additionally, an extended period of analysis in covering these newspapers might provide more concrete evidence as to whether or not university newspapers provide a significantly greater amount of hard news than national newspapers.

Bibliography

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