THE
DONALD MCGANNON
COMMUNICATION RESEARCH CENTER
FORDHAM UNIVERSITY
FACULTY MEMORIAL HALL, 4TH FLOOR
BRONX, NY 10458
718-817-4195
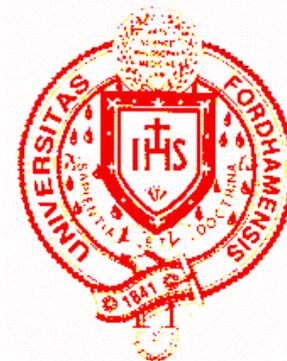
Peer Review of FCC Media Ownership Study #4-1
The Impact of Ownership Structure on Television Stations' News and Public Affairs
Programming
By
Daniel Shiman
Federal Communications Commission

Reviewed by:
Philip M. Napoli
Associate Professor, Graduate School of Business
Director, Donald McGannon Communication Research Center
Fordham University

This paper addresses a topic that has received a substantial amount of research attention, and does a very thorough job of reviewing and assessing the relevant literature – and in so doing outlines a clear theoretical framework for the analyses that follow. In addition, an extensive data set has been put together for these analyses. The statistical analyses (i.e., the use of fixed effects models), and the nature of the data gathered (multi-year) facilitate substantial improvement over previous research in terms of being able to draw causal inferences.

One aspect of this study I found a bit disappointing was that it analyzed local and non-local news and public affairs programming in combination (rather than separating local from non-local). To the extent that the broadcast networks are a major source of news and public affairs programming via the nightly newscasts and the Sunday morning public affairs programming, it's a shame that this analysis didn't separate out local news and public affairs, in order to provide a more focused sense of the behaviors of individual stations, rather than also incorporating the behaviors of the networks they rely upon for much of their programming.

I'm particularly confused by the statement on p. I-26 that such analyses were not conducted because the data set employed "did not provide the means to distinguish between local and non-local news." Having used the Tribune Media Services program schedule database relied upon in this study myself on many occasions, I can say with a fair bit of confidence that this should not be the case. The TMS database contains a Program Origination field which labels each program as Local, Syndicated, or Network (at least it did the last time I used the database). Even if such a data field were not utilized, or were, for some reason, no longer

available, there are other possible approaches to distinguishing between local and non-local news and public affairs programming (see, for instance, Media Ownership Study #3).

And so, I do think it's a bit of a shame that the opportunity to analyze how local stations differ in the extent to which they are producing (rather than producing *and* distributing) news and public affairs programming has been passed up, given the comprehensiveness of the data set that has been constructed. In this regard, I think the wording should be a bit more precise in spots – for instance on p. I-24 when the author describes the effect of TV-Radio cross-ownership on "the production of public affairs minutes." Strictly speaking, when network and syndicated programming are being included in the analysis, we really aren't getting a precise sense of the extent to which individual stations are *producing* public affairs programming, since some of the programming incorporated into the dependent variable is programming that the station did not produce, but rather received from a network or syndicator.

Perhaps I was particularly struck by this aspect of the analysis given the statement on p. I-9 that one of the issues to be tackled in the paper would be "how much news programming do [stations] decide to air *outside* of their commitment to carrying network programming" (emphasis added). This statement certainly suggests a subsequent focus on the provision of local news, since carrying network newscasts is part of many affiliates' commitment to carrying network programming; and so it seems the paper doesn't really seem to employ a methodology that allows it to answer the question it set out to answer.

Along these same lines, I also think it would be helpful if the author clarified some of the comparisons that take place at various points throughout this paper, when this paper's results are compared to previous research that focused on local news and public affairs (see, e.g., p. I-15, p. I-22). The inclusion of non-local news and public affairs programming in the analysis is a substantial difference (see above), and so to compare the results of this study with the results of previous studies that focused on local news and public affairs really is to compare apples to oranges – a point that the author does finally acknowledge on p. I-27 within the context of the Yan (2006) study; but I think this point should be made at the outset when such comparisons are drawn.

One thought I had in terms of the independent variables: in terms of measuring the size of the station group, the number of stations owned nationally by the station's parent company was used. This approach makes sense, but given that the current national television station ownership regulations are crafted in terms of the total national audience reach of all stations owned by the parent (instead of in terms of the number of stations owned), it seems like it might have been interesting/useful to include a total audience reach independent variable in addition to or instead of the number of stations owned.

Also, while I noted above the comprehensiveness of the data set put together for this analysis, one minor concern I had with the data set has to do with the focus on "sweeps" months (May and November) in the gathering of the programming data. From a programming standpoint, it has been shown that the sweeps process itself can exert an influence over the type of programming being aired, as programmers seek to boost their

audiences during those periods when their audiences are actually being measured. Such deviations from the norm may take place *within* content categories (e.g., more sensationalistic news programming) rather than *across* content categories (e.g., airing fewer public affairs programs in favor of more popular program types), and thus might not effect the results of a program-type analysis such as this. But in a case like this, when such a comprehensive television station database has been constructed, the ideal approach probably would have been to not over-represent sweeps periods in the two week programming sample (I discuss this issue in a bit more detail in my review of Study #3, in which I raise a similar concern).

Another point I raised in my review of Study #3 that bears repeating in the context of this study has to do with the program type classifications in the TMS program schedule database. I have used this data source a number of times and have found it to be as thorough and reliable a data source available in terms of local television program schedule information. It is not without error, however. Consequently, I've found it useful to engage in a basic verification process of the program classifications (via either the program description field in the database or via web-based searching for individual programs, or contacting stations directly), as I've found some tendencies for error in the program type categorizations. To illustrate with an example, in a study of local public affairs programming, we once found a local station's program called "10's" listed as Public Affairs, but when we called the station to determine the nature of the program, it was described to us by a station representative as "our local hot body contest." In this same study, we found that 2.37% of the programs in our sample classified by TMS as "public affairs" did not meet the traditional definition of public affairs programming employed by the Commission (see Yan & Napoli, 2006), though we've found very few instances of programs that should be categorized as public affairs not being categorized as such. News, on the other hand, represents a more straightforward classification process, so we have not encountered any meaningful inaccuracy in terms of TMS's classification of news programming.

Thus, misclassifications in the program categorizations fortunately seem to happen relatively infrequently, so I'm not calling into question the use of the TMS database. I do think, though, that employing some sort of verification process to assess the extent to which the programs are being coded correctly by TMS, and to make necessary corrections, is useful (at least in terms of public affairs programming). I do recognize with a programming sample of the size employed in this paper, this becomes difficult. But even if some sub-sample of the programming were subjected to a verification process to provide an estimate of the overall error level in the data set, that would be helpful information to have.

Philip M. Napoli

References

Yan, M.Z., & Napoli, P.M. (2006). Market competition, station ownership, and local public affairs programming on broadcast television. *Journal of Communication, 56,* 795-812.