

# Market Competition and News Quality

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## MARKET COMPETITION AND NEWS QUALITY

Few would dispute that the overall “quality” of mass journalism – however exactly quality is defined – has declined since the 1950s. Long before Matt Druge broke the Lewinsky story on the internet, the ratio of “serious” to “sensational” journalism was falling and the ratio of entertainment to information was rising. Some go so far as to say that we are in a “crisis of political communication” (Blumler and Guervitch, 1995). Others argue merely that the journalistic house is “out of order” (Patterson, 1994).

The question taken up in this paper is why. Some blame the values or personal dispositions of journalists (Patterson, 1994; Lichter et al., 1986); others cite the takeover of numerous journalistic enterprises by large, profit-maximizing corporations (Bagdikian, 1992); some blame market competition (McManus, 1994); and still others attribute change to a complex of cultural, political, and institutional factors (Blumler and Guervitch, 1995).

This paper argues that market competition is the main cause. The values of journalists, as I argue, are for the most part on the side of higher quality news. The profit motive of owners is innocuous, except under conditions of heavy market competition. Yet market competition, whether before the spread of television or after, and whether in this country or abroad, seems to make a consistent difference. For example, British TV news, which has until recently enjoyed a state monopoly and still has a subsidy, is usually considered “higher quality” than TV news in the United States, where numerous providers compete for the news audience. The U.S. produces some high quality TV journalism, but it is mainly on PBS, where it is shielded from competition by a subsidy. Meanwhile, the lowest quality American TV news is produced in the most competitive news sector, namely, local television. Moreover, the very worst TV news is produced, as we shall see below, in the local markets that are most competitive. A comparison of major British and American newspapers is also telling. In this domain, the American media, which still typically enjoy monopolies in their local markets, seem to have the quality edge over media in Britain, where the most important papers compete against one another in a national market.

The method of this paper is to make as many such comparisons as possible between more and less competitive sectors of the news business. Some of these comparisons are, as will become apparent, extremely soft, in the sense that they depend on merely impressionistic evidence. Most, however, involve some sort of quantitative indicators. And all run in the same direction: For every set of cases in which I am able to make plausible comparisons, higher levels of market competition are associated with lower levels of news quality.

The paper undertakes to ground its claims about the effects of competition in a larger empirical and theoretical universe – that of the professions in general. A universal feature of professions, as the paper argues, is the attempt to insulate occupational work from market pressures. From religion to medicine to journalism, the effect of breaking down this insulation by increasing competitive pressures is to erode traditional professional values, whatever those values might be in a particular profession.

## DEFINITION OF CONCEPTS

The first step in establishing the relationship between news quality and news competition is to specify the key concepts. Neither concept is easy to measure and the former is hard even to define. Further complicating the problem is that I wish to make comparisons across a range of times, places, and types of media, sometimes using my own data and sometimes relying on data collected by others. The need, therefore, is for concepts that are easy to operationalize and adapt.

I begin with news quality. Many authors have found it useful to distinguish between an information model of journalism and an entertainment model. Of course, good journalism must both inform and entertain, but the balance may vary. One element of the conception of “quality journalism” to be used in this paper is that it is primarily intended to provide information about the larger world.

The other key element is the content of news. The news media provide information about a great variety of topics, from the activities of government to stock prices to tips on how to pick high quality Cabernets. Some of this content refers to matters of general social or political significance and is implicitly intended to help citizens in their role as democratic decision-makers; other information is intended primarily for purposes of entertainment or personal consumption. My notion of news quality stresses the former. Thus, I define high quality news as information about matters of general political or social significance.

Other definitions of quality are certainly possible. For example, journalists might make huge expenditures of energy and enterprise to find out and report how Princess Diana spent the last day of her life. The same can be true of reporting on a more significant subject, such as whether red wine has special powers to prevent heart attacks (as 60 Minutes reported, probably incorrectly). Such stories might therefore be considered high quality journalism. However, it is precisely the rise of such news reporting, including the several varieties of “news you can use,” that many decry as evidence of the decline of news quality. Conversely, it is the kind of news I have described as quality news that the critics of contemporary journalism would like to see increase.

A more important reason for favoring my conception of news quality is that it describes the kind of journalism that commands the greatest prestige within the journalistic profession itself. A perusal of journalism textbooks, which stress public affairs reporting; of the biographies of famous journalists, which never fail to stress the extent to which the ego has done stories of great general significance, and, indeed, the kinds of journalists who become famous, all support the notion that journalists value the reporting of public affairs information more highly than anything else. Why it is important that journalists value the kind of news I have defined as quality news will be explained in the next section.

I turn now to competition. News is offered to the public in three main formats – print, radio, and television. Within each format, there are different kinds of offerings. In the domain of TV, for example, there are network news shows, local news shows, news magazines, and morning magazine shows. To some extent, different kinds of news programs appeal to different market niches, which means that they do not directly compete. But from inspection of media as different as the *New York Times* and the *New York Daily News*, it is apparent that the boundaries between market niches are vague and permeable, since both papers aspire, in their own ways, to be full-service news providers: *The Times* did not, for example, fail to cover Princess Diana’s funeral, nor is it above

putting sports news on its front page; the *Daily News*, for its part, does not fail to cover wars, elections, and even certain acts of Congress. One must therefore assume that all news programs that offer their product within the same geographical market are to some degree in competition with one another, such that gains by one tend to reduce the market share of others. Competition becomes more intense as:

- Two or more news providers focus on the same general type of news (e.g., local news)
- Two or more news providers compete in the same medium, such as print or television
- Two or more news providers offer their product in the same time slot.

On the other hand, competition becomes less intense when one or more news programs receives any sort of subsidy whose effect is to free it from the need to win audience share through market competition.

Altogether, then, news competition may be defined as the extent to which two or more news providers offer the same kind of news product to the same audience in the same format at the same time.

By this accounting, competition is especially intense for American local TV news, since several programs offer the same news product at the same time in the same medium. Competition between local TV news and network TV news is somewhat less intense but still significant, since both types of programs use the same medium at the same time. Competition is perhaps least intense between newspapers and TV, since they use different media and different time periods. It may nonetheless be the case that the greatest competitive threat to newspapers comes from the morning news magazines, which offer the same type of general news product at the same time as most newspapers are delivered.

#### MARKET COMPETITION AND PROFESSIONAL VALUES

A common definition of professions is that they are a “form of occupational control” that legitimates group control “by attaching [its] expertise to values with general cultural legitimacy, increasingly the values of rationality, efficiency, and science.” Similarly, for Andrew Abbott, who is perhaps the leading contemporary sociologist of the subject, “professions are exclusive occupational groups applying somewhat abstract knowledge to particular cases” with the aim of controlling a work jurisdiction.<sup>1</sup> Going a step further, George Bernard Shaw has opined that “every profession is a conspiracy against the laity.”

The theoretical notion that self-interested groups control their work by appeals to values, abstract knowledge or, as Shaw thinks, hocus pocus is anathema to a key supposition of standard economic theory, which is that self-interested succeed, or not, through market competition. Professionals are certainly aware of the tension between market and professional values and attempt to manage it as best they can. On one hand, they conduct continuous public relations campaigns to convince their publics that the product the professionals wish to produce is the product that the public wishes to consume. On the other, they seek to prevent potential competitors from offering any other kind of product than the one the professionals wish to provide. Thus, professions routinely attempt to restrict entry

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<sup>1</sup> P. 16, 8.

to the profession through licensing and credentialing, to prohibit advertising and self-promotion, and to sanction members who violate professional standards.

One of the most successful professions by these criteria is the research university professorate. It has managed to convince the public, or at least the public's representatives, that high quality education requires lifetime job security for professors (tenure), the freedom of professors to teach whatever they want (academic freedom), and the opportunity to do research. There is, to be sure, a great deal of competition among professors. But most of the competition involves entry to the field rather than advancement within it, and essentially all of the competition is on terms on which professors wish to compete. Needless to say, the job of university professor would be quite different if professors were more directly exposed to market influences.

The clergy are a particularly instructive case of a profession that attempts to restrict competition but often fails to do so. In a handful of countries – e.g., Sweden, Israel – the clergy have been able to obtain what all professions aspire to obtain: a state subsidy for their services, lifetime job security, and restrictions on the right of competitors to enter the field. In these countries, religion tends to be highly intellectualized, as suits the tastes of the highly educated persons who offer religious service (Iannaccone, 1995). At the same time, church attendance in these countries tends to be relatively low, since the appeal of heavily intellectualized religious doctrine is inherently limited. In many other countries, however, there are no state subsidies for religion, notable lack of job security, and few if any restrictions on entry to the field, with the result that clergy must compete for their clientele. In these countries, religion has become both emotional and popular. The United States, with its rigid separation of church and state, scores of highly emotional religious creeds, and unusually high levels of church attendance, exemplifies this type of case.

The thesis that market competition tends to make religion more emotional and more popular is, as would be expected, controversial within its academic community, and, indeed, it is far from proven. But the general argument fits a number of important cases very well, and it has recently been extended by a political scientist studying the Catholic Church's response to revolutionary movements in Latin America. Gill (1998) has shown that whether the Catholic religious establishments of this area embrace "liberation theology," thereby siding with the impoverished masses of their countries against the economic elite, is determined by the degree to which they face competition from Protestant missionaries. The capitulation to market competition is not, of course, described as such by its perpetrators. Rather, it is justified in terms of the teachings of Jesus Christ, especially the Sermon on the Mount, which argue for solicitude for the poor. But the pattern of acceptance and rejection of liberation theology indicates that another type of logic is at work.

The situation of the clergy is, I suggest, analogous in important ways to the situation faced by many professionals, including journalists. The work product they would most like to provide – a product always justified in terms of high cultural values – will sell well enough under conditions of restricted competition, so that is what professionals provide when they are insulated from market pressures. But when, for any reason, competition increases, the effect is to undermine the ability of professionals to provide what they consider a "quality" product.

As applied to journalism, this question raises a number of questions. Perhaps the most important is whether the masses of ordinary citizens actually want, in a meaningful sense, the more emotional, less intellectual and arguably “low quality” news they increasingly get. After all, a constant refrain of both academic and journalistic critics is that recent trends toward low quality news are being foisted on an unwilling public because of a greedy concern for profits by owners.

A considerable tradition of political analysis makes it seem utterly implausible that the masses of ordinary citizens want “high quality” news in the sense I am using the term. The claim – first articulated by Schumpeter (1942), cast in canonical form by Downs (1957), and supported most recently by Deli Carpini and Keeter (1995) – is that it is rational for citizens to be ignorant of politics and that, generally speaking, most are. The problem is not that citizens lack civic virtue; it is that there are no incentives for citizens to become informed about politics because the chance that they can, as individuals, affect political outcomes is essentially nil. Voters are more likely to be mugged on the way to the polls than to actually affect an election or other political outcome.<sup>2</sup> Hence, citizens will prefer to use their time for matters that promise a more direct and certain return for the effort, such as playing with their children, working overtime, or perhaps just watching a comedy on TV.

This analysis of mass preferences for political information is not based on the direct testimony of the citizenry, as expressed in public opinion surveys. Such testimony seems to suggest higher levels of public interest in politics than can be justified from the notion of rational ignorance. For example, 49 percent of respondents to a 1992 survey said that they were “very much interested” in that year’s political campaigns, while 40 percent professed to being “somewhat interested” and only 11 percent said they were “not much interested.” Another question found that 27 percent claim to follow what’s going on in government and public affairs “most of the time,” 41 percent follow it “some of the time,” and 32 percent follow it only “now and then” or “hardly at all.”

These numbers, though not extremely high, nonetheless indicate more interest than the Schumpeter-Downs thesis of rational ignorance can comfortably accommodate — but also more interest than probably really exists. For there is a clear tendency of many citizens to attribute more interest to themselves in verbal statements than they exhibit by their actual political behavior. Thus, Doris Graber (1984) found in her study of the news consumption habits that ordinary citizens were often bored by the news, but that they nonetheless

. . . grumbled frequently about the oversimplified treatment of all news, including election news, on television. Yet when the debates and other special news programs and newspaper features presented a small opportunity for more extensive exposure to issues, they were unwilling to seize it. For the most part, the [study subjects] would not read and study carefully the more extensive versions of election and other news in newspapers and news magazines. Masses of specific facts and statistics were uniformly characterized as dull, confusing, and unduly detailed. Such attitudes present a catch-22 situation. If more detail and specificity is resented, how else can the demand for greater depth be satisfied? (p. 105)

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<sup>2</sup> My colleague, Tom Schwartz, claims credit for this formulation of the classic problem.

Over the years, journalists have occasionally tried schemes to increase the attention citizens pay to news, mostly without success. But as Lance Bennett (1996) reports:

...many editors and marketers think that the few noble experiments to improve election issue coverage and offer more in-depth political reporting are up against a basic obstacle: People really do not want more serious news, even when they say they do. (p. 22-23)

W. Russell Neuman (1991) makes the same observation:

Those who call for public-affairs programming on television do not tend to watch it when it is made available... Those who claim to attend to the media for purposes of acquiring information do score slightly higher on tests of learning and recall, but the differences are surprisingly small...

The key finding ... that must be dealt with candidly if we are to understand the nature of low-salience learning in regard to politics and culture is simply that people are attracted to the path of least resistance. For knowledge acquisition in general, and for public-affairs knowledge in particular, people are not inclined to give such matters a great deal of effort. (p. 95, 103)

It does not follow from this analysis that citizens should be uninterested in news about new medical treatments, consumer rip-offs, or the life of Princess Diana. Such news may, in different ways, have intrinsic consumption value. But information about matters of general social and political importance – “high quality” news – is another matter. This is, as I have argued, what journalists are most interested in producing, but it is not what most of the consuming public is keen to receive.

Given this argument and the definitions provided in the previous section, it follows that:

- All else equal, journalists will be best able to produce “high quality” news when they are most insulated from competitive market pressures.
- Increases and decreases in competitive pressure should be associated with increases and decreases in the “quality” of news.
- When a new news program enters a previously non-competitive market, it will always locate itself to the “downmarket” side of the existing entrant, since the existing entrant will have been providing higher quality news than market competition can sustain.
- As professionals, journalists should be expected never to lead and always to resist efforts to lower the informational content of news.

It does not seem to me that any clear prediction follows with respect to the entertainment content of news. Journalists know that they are always, to some degree, in a struggle to maximize audience share, and there is no reason that, other things being equal, they should resist bright and lively reporting – that is, news that is entertaining. It is only when entertainment drives out “high quality” news content that they should object.

The next section of the paper presents evidence bearing on these expectations.

## EVIDENCE CONCERNING THE EFFECTS OF NEWS COMPETITION

The method of this paper is to make as many head-to-head comparisons of news quality as possible between more and less competitive sectors of the news business. Several kinds of comparisons will be made:

- Over-time comparisons of the same type of news outlet with itself as competitive conditions change.
- Comparisons of different types of news outlets with each other in the same market when competitive conditions differ.
- Comparisons of British and American media.

The quality of this evidence, as acknowledged earlier, varies from rigorously quantitative to merely impressionistic. Future versions of the paper will, I hope, bring all of the evidence up to a common high standard.

**1. Local television news, 1960 to the present.** The earliest local TV news shows were often staffed by experienced print journalists bearing the traditional news values of their profession. The programs they produced were immediately popular and profitable, and they grew like Topsy. Figure 1 illustrates the trend for three cities. The data show trends for all news programs, including network news and news magazines, but the bulk of the over-time increase is due to local news broadcasts.

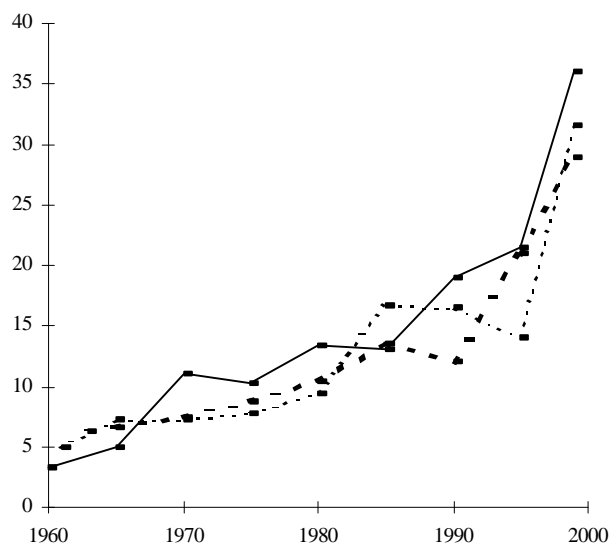
INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

The quality of local news offered on local news shows declined in this period. In the early 1970s these shows featured information about city government, schools, and state government, but by the late 1980s and 1990s, local TV news shows became heavily laden with stories about crime, natural disasters, and other episodic matters. Many news departments no longer even employ city hall beat reporters or state capital bureaus (McManus, 1994).

These trends have been widely noted in the popular press, but I have found only one quantitative study. It is, however, of high quality. In 1976, a scholar did a content analysis of 10 local news programs in four Pennsylvania media markets (Adams, 1978) to determine the amount of hard news. Sixteen years later, Slattery and Hakanen (1994) returned to the same stations and applied the same coding scheme to the same programs. They found that the percentage of news about government, education and politics had fallen from 54 percent in 1976 to 15 percent in 1992. At the same time, the percentage of news rated as sensationalistic or human interest rose from 25 percent to 48 percent. By my definition of news quality, this is evidence of decline. Moreover, Slatter and Hakanen argued that “embedded sensationalism” within stories categorized as government news had led to an underestimate of the amount of sensationalism in current news, and hence an underestimate of the amount of change that had occurred in the 16-year gap between studies.

Why the change? By all accounts, the pressure for change has emanated not from reporters but from upper managements that sought higher audience ratings and profits. In his study of local TV news in *Market-Driven Journalism*, McManus (1994) interviewed one news director who told him bluntly that he had learned to think “with a cash register in my head.” As McManus continued,

Figure 1. Hours of news broadcasting in Chicago, New Orleans, and St. Louis



[this station manager] refused to permit my access to the station, arguing that he did not want his reporters to think about news values or journalism while gathering stories. Instead, he wanted them to think about ratings. He instructed his reporters to imagine that he was placing a certain number of viewers in their hands at the beginning of their story, he explained, and he wanted them back at the end. (168)

Reporters, and even some managers, disliked doing this sort of “market-driven journalism,” but felt they had no choice. When McManus challenged his interview subjects for abandoning journalistic values,

The most common response of those interviewed was something like: “I know you’re right. But I hate to think of myself that way.” (168)

In a study of a Florida TV station that sought to offer a fare of more serious news, journalist Michael Winerip reported that when the policy of high quality news was announced,

the newsroom erupted in applause. Kathy Marsh, a reporter who under the previous regime was assigned to do a special report on penis and bust enhancer, leaped out of her seat, clapping. Dan Billow, who covers the space program at nearby Cape Canaveral, said, “It’s like we’re having honor restored to our occupation. Wineripi, 1997, p. 31)

Winerip found, however, that the policy of high quality news was losing out in the ratings war to two stations that emphasized crime, violence and bizarre occurrences. “The thing is, people like it,” Winerip wrote, making it clear that the new station manager had an uphill fight to turn around his ratings before losing his job.

This evidence, even if accepted as applicable to the universe of local TV news programs (which it probably is), is only equivocal support for my claims. It is, after all, possible that owners might seek to maximize ratings and profits even in the absence of competition, and that it is only a coincidence that they discovered a news formula for doing so at the same time that competitive pressures were increasing. I shall address this issue later on. For the moment my claim is only that the evidence concerning local TV news, which involves tandem over-time changes in competitiveness and news quality, is consistent with my general argument. I note that the qualitative evidence of lack of enthusiasm for “low quality” news among journalists is also consistent with my argument.

**2. Newspapers in comparison with local TV news.** Although, as noted above, most local TV news programs face heavy competition – typically several shows offering the same product in the same time slots in the same medium – most newspapers have it much easier. The large majority of American newspapers have enjoyed monopolies in their local markets for decades. Except in New York, where there are three city-wide daily papers, no city in America has more than two city-wide papers, and a large majority has only one.

These days the most serious competition for newspapers comes not from other newspapers but from television. It is often observed, probably correctly, that evening TV news destroyed afternoon newspapers, and it now appears that morning TV news programs – which offer a mixture of local and national news, including local traffic and weather reports – are harming newspapers, which occupy the same time slot. Still, since newspapers and TV news are different media, I rate the competition between them as moderate rather than intense.

What, then, is the quality of American newspapers compared to local TV news? In the article cited above, Winerip writes, “Most anyone in the press and academia who has given much thought has concluded that while there are exceptions, local television news is atrocious” (p. 33). I believe that this is an accurate statement and, further, that no one would make such a statement about American newspapers. There is some evidence, to be reviewed immediately below, that the quality of newspapers has slipped, but I have found no blanket claims that newspapers are anything like atrocious. My impression, for which there is evidence below, is that most newspapers produce the highest quality journalism they can under the resource constraints they face.

The (largely impressionistic) evidence that local newspapers typically offer a higher quality form of journalism than local TV programs is consistent with, but again not strong evidence for, my claim that higher levels of competition are associated with lower levels of news quality.

**3. American newspapers, 1950 to the present.** The increase in local TV news programming counts, by my conception of competition, as a moderate increase in the competitive pressure on newspapers. At the same time, newspaper circulation has begun to lose readership, most likely because of the competition from television. From 1970 to 1988, total circulation of American newspapers increased, but at a rate less than the general increase in the population (Bogart, 1992, p. 87). In a sample of 67 newspapers gathered for another purpose (see below), I found that circulation has recently begun to decline in absolute terms. Between 1990 and 1998, daily circulation of my newspaper sample fell about 6 percent in the market area of sampled papers. (Newspapers that ceased to exist between 1990 and 1998 within the markets of sampled papers are counted within the denominator on which this change in circulation has been calculated; if failed newspapers are omitted from the calculation, the decline is only 2 percent.)

I have found no studies of trends in newspaper quality during the period 1950 to the present. There are, however, two indications of what appears to be a small but significant declines in newspaper quality. Bogart (1992, p. 89) comments, without presenting any data, that there has been “more emphasis on features relative to news” in newspapers in the 1980s. In the same vein, Diamond (1994) in his book on the *New York Times* describes how the “gray lady” of the 1950s and 60s was forced by competitive pressure to brighten its writing, add more human interest features, and even big color pictures to its news pages. “In pursuit of circulation,” as persons interviewed by Diamond said, “the [Max Frankel-led] *Times* was willing to get down and scratch for the same kind of dirt that, in the past, it left to the city’s rude tabloids” (p. 9). In his chapter on “Soft Times,” Diamond writes:

It was the summer of 1978. The Times was introducing its new sections covering such topics as food, furniture, and design. These daily magazines, one for each weekday, represented the Times' prime editorial initiative of the 1970s. They signaled a major investment of both money and staff, the centerpiece of the effort to attract new readers. Americans were spending an ever increasing amount of time in front of their television sets. They were getting the first hard reports of developments in Washington, Wall Street, or the Middle East from network news on the nights before their morning papers were delivered. Attracted by nightly television and the early morning shows like "Today" on NBC--and later, by "new media" networks like the twenty-four hour CNN--the traditional audiences

for news seemed to be drifting away from their newspapers. Around the country, editors tried new formats to lure readers. The Washington Post, the Los Angeles Times, and the Miami Herald had all taken the lead in developing sections devoted to "life-style" features. (p. 84)

I undertook a few small test bores to see if Diamond's general observations could be supported by quantitative measurement. In particular, I asked a research assistant to rate a sample of front page stories on a five-point scale, where "5" represented "information useful readers in their roles as citizen decision-makers," and "1" represented information that was useful to readers purely as private individuals, such a information about health or entertainment. The stories were from one week of Times front pages in 1970, 1980, and 1999. The results showed a decline that was highly statistically significant but substantively rather modest: The mean level of news quality on the five-point scale fell from 4.96 in 1970 to 4.84 in 1980 to 4.44 in 1999. However, it was perhaps notable that the number of front-page stories in the sample weeks fell from 79 in 1970 to 49 in 1980 to 45 in 1999. In expanding font-size and increasing picture content, the *Times* also cut down on the number of stories it could place on the front page.

It would be quite easy to extend these measurements to a larger sample of papers, and I expect to do so. In the meantime, I take the scattering of available evidence, in conjunction with my own strong impression that newspapers have in fact gone somewhat soft, as additional support for the general argument of the effect of competition.

**4. Market size and competitive pressure.** Consider the case of TV news, in which production costs are nearly constant with respect to audience size (once a big antenna has been purchased) but advertising revenue increases with audience size. If "low quality" news is no more expensive to produce than "high quality" news and has more audience appeal, then every incentive is for owners to move downmarket, except one: Downmarket news is less prestigious than high brow news and some owners value their reputations as producers of quality news. Now imagine two stations, one in a market of 500,000 viewers and one in a market of 18 million viewers, which is about the size of the New York city TV market. Suppose that, by watering down news quality, a program could attract an additional one percent of viewers in each market. In the small market, this would amount to 5,000 additional viewers, whereas in the big market it would mean 180,000 additional viewers. On the assumption that advertising revenues are a linear function of audience size, the pressure to go after the additional one percent of audience share would be vastly greater in the big market. The expectation, therefore, is that pressures to abandon journalistic values in pursuit of larger audience share would be greater in bigger markets.

There is, however, an opposing logic. Bigger markets can mean more advertising revenue per hour of news programming, which could translate into more resources for the production of each hour of news, which could lead to more reporters, more in-depth reporting, and, more generally, "higher quality" news.

The question, then, is whether the additional revenue generated in larger markets will be captured by owners in the form of higher profits or by journalists in the form of support for higher quality news. Figure 2, showing the relationship between audience size and news quality for newspapers and TV news, attempts to answer this

questions. The measure of newspaper quality in Figure 2 is the number of Pulitzer prizes won in the period 1977 to 1998. The measure of TV news quality is the “news quality” index produced by The Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia School of Journalism. The TV news index seeks to measure depth of reporting, balance of viewpoints within stories, number of story sources, the expertise of the sources, and the degree of local relevance.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

As can be seen, the data seem to support both arguments: Bigger markets tend to produce better newspapers but worse TV news. Why might this be? I suggest that the difference is due to competitive pressures. As Figure 3 shows, there is vastly more competition in the provision of local TV news than of local print journalism. Moreover, this differential increases with market size. The effect of this is as follows: In the absence of competition, it is far from obvious what might sell best in a market. Owners may well come to feel, at the urging of their journalistic staff, that they are getting most of the profit that can be squeezed out of the market by offering high quality journalism since they will never confront any painful evidence to the contrary. Quite simply, newspapers can afford to offer a non-competitive product even in large markets because there is no competitor to punish them for doing so. But in a large market that does have competition, the less successful programs will become aware of their deficiencies and will be sorely tempted to break ranks with journalistic orthodoxy. When, as has tended to happen in TV news, this leads to higher audience share, it sets off a downmarket spiral that eventually forces even high-minded owners to abandon their journalistic scruples.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

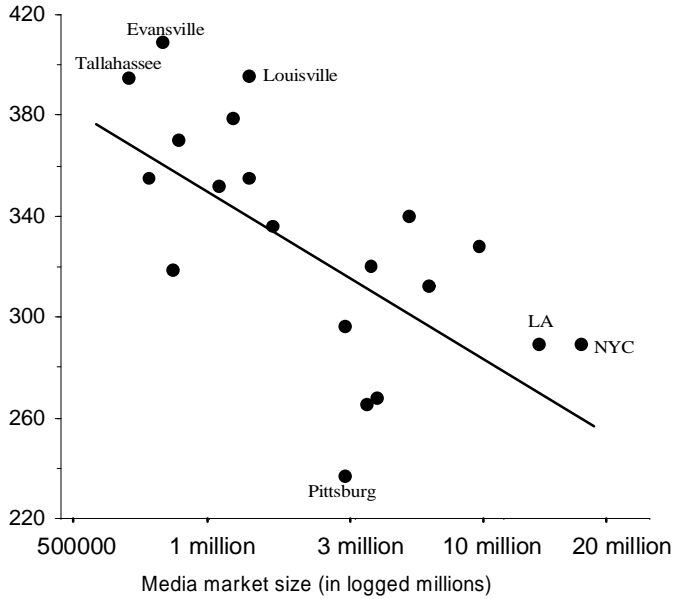
Yet, as Figure 3 shows, there are some large markets in which two or, in the case of New York, three newspapers compete. If the previous, TV-directed argument is correct, it ought to be the case that some big city newspapers – in particular, those with competitors – are induced by competitive pressure to go downmarket.

I have used a sample of daily newspapers on the Lexus-Nexus information service to test this proposition. To measure news quality, I calculated a “Lewinsky quotient” – that is, the ratio of stories about the Lewinsky scandal to more serious front page stories, namely, stories about Bosnia, the federal budget deficit, and problems in Social Security and Medicare. Although coverage of Lewinsky was often serious, a high Lewinsky quotient – “all Monica, all the time” – would be indicative of commitment more to entertainment than to “high quality” journalism.

Initial examination of the data supported my theoretical expectation. On a simple difference of means test, the Lewinsky ratio was 59 percent larger in cities in which there were competing dailies ( $p = .02$ , one-tailed on assumption of unequal variance). However, an examination of a scatterplot of the data, as shown in Figure 4, undermined this result. In this figure, solid black dots indicate newspapers with a city-wide competitor in the same market and clear white dots indicate a newspaper monopoly. As can be seen, the only cases in which competition led to markedly more Lewinsky coverage were cases in which one of the competitors was a tabloid. For the majority of cases in which the competitors were not tabloids, there was no effect of competition. Thus, in a regression which

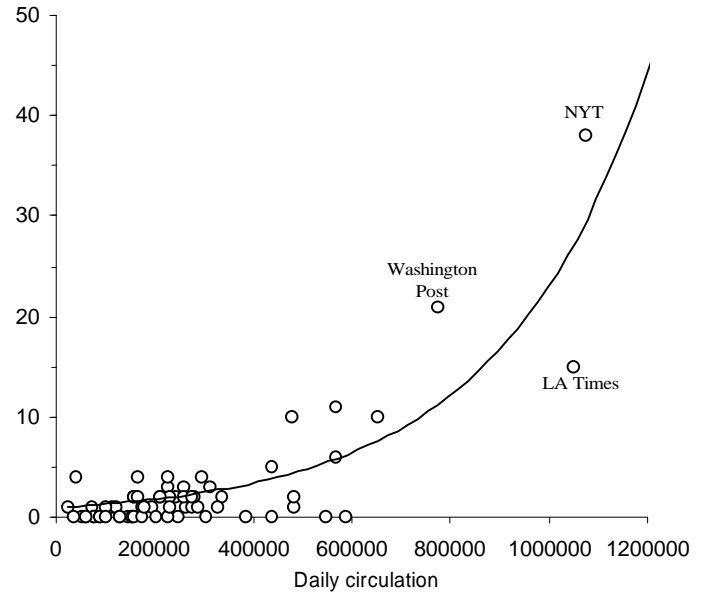
Figure 2. News quality and market size for newspapers and TV news

Average news quality scores for local TV news markets by media market size in 20 selected markets



**Note:** News quality was measured by a research team sponsored by Project for Excellence in Journalism, an affiliate of the Columbia University School of Journalism. Data in figure are average of scores for network stations in each of 20 media markets. The news quality scores are published in Rosenstiel et al., 1998.

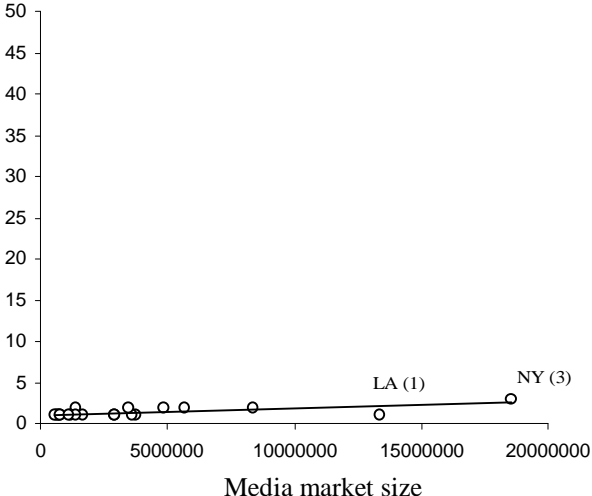
Number of recent Pulitzer prizes by circulation for a non-sample of daily newspapers



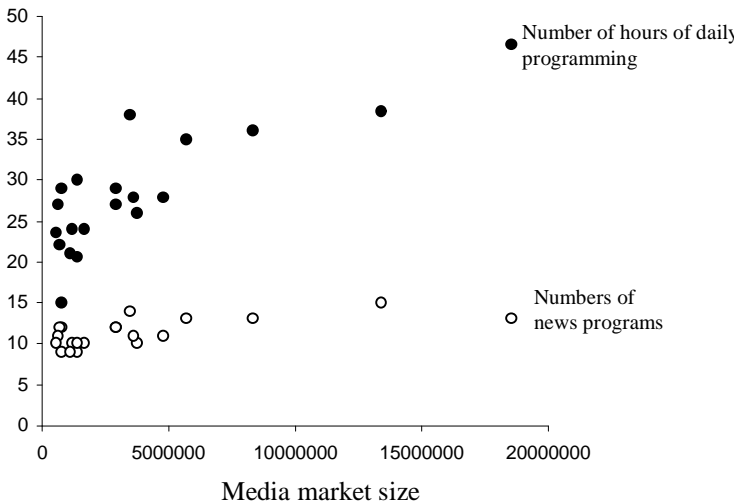
**Note:** The non-random sample of newspapers was drawn from those available on Lexus-Nexus. The sampling criterion was to pick all of the major papers in Lexus-Nexus (e.g., *The New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*), plus an arbitrary selection of the rest. Total number of cases is 67. Circulation figures are for daily editions and come from the 1998 edition of *Editor and Publisher*. Pulitzer prizes are for the period 1977 to 1998.

Figure 3. The effect of market size on level of competition in selected newspaper and TV news markets

Number of newspapers in 20 selected media markets



Number of TV news programs and program hours in 20 selected media markets



controlled for circulation and the presence of a tabloid, the tabloid dummy had a large and statistically significant coefficient but the competition dummy had essentially no effect.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

(I note in passing that whether a newspaper was owned by a chain in general, or by the often-vilified Gannett chain in particular, had no effect on the Lewinsky quotient. It was also interesting that smaller papers did not, in general, have a higher Lewinsky quotient. I take this as evidence that, apart from the resource constraints that prevent small papers from competing effectively for Pulitzer prizes, they aspire to produce high quality news. I must, however, confess a possible bias in this matter, since I worked for two years as a general assignment reporter on a small daily newspaper.)

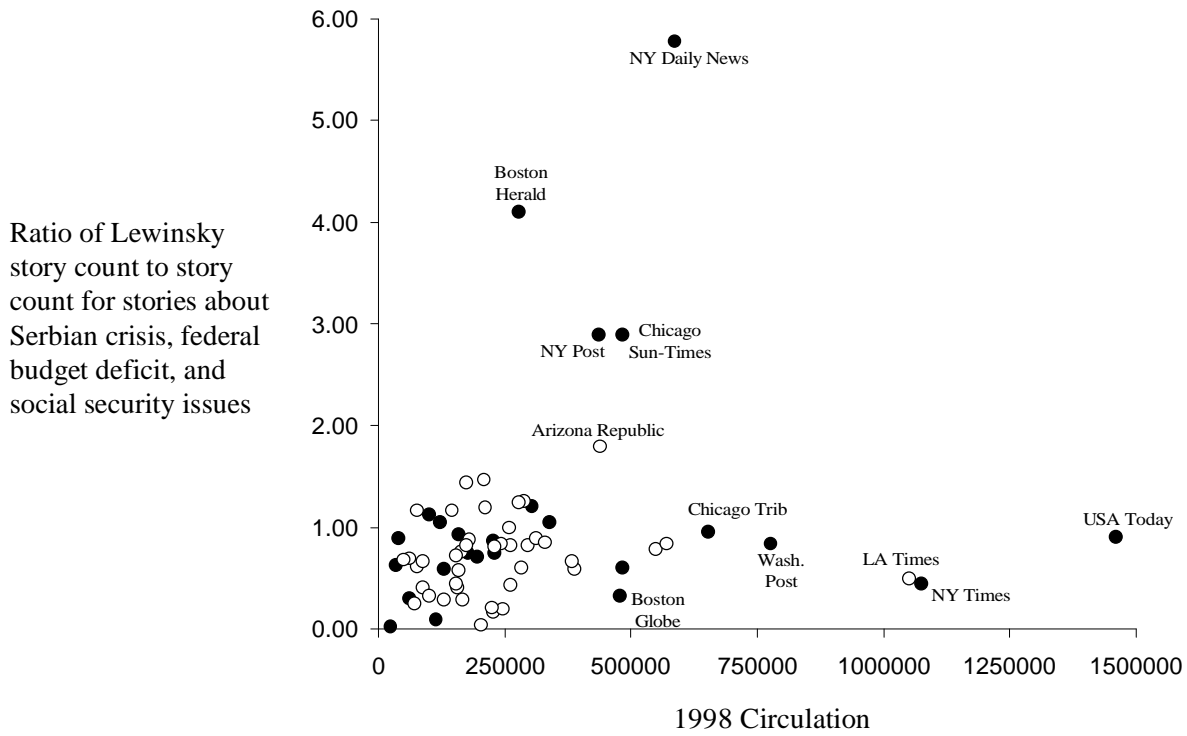
Although the regression results do not support my argument, they do not really damage it either. After all, the highest Lewinsky ratio occurs, as expected, in competitive markets. What appears to be happening is that, in small-to-medium sized newspaper markets, newspaper competition has no effect. The papers probably do compete, but they compete within the standard journalistic paradigm, trying to outdo each other on “hard hitting reporting” rather than on lurid crime and sex news. But as market size becomes large, there is an increase in the chance that one of the competitors will adapt a tabloid strategy.<sup>3</sup> Thus, exactly as in the case of TV journalism, competition alone is not associated with the abandonment of journalistic standards; rather, it is the combination of large market size and competition that has the critical effect. The main difference between TV and print appears to be that, due to lower overall levels of competition in newspaper markets, the necessary combination of market and competitive pressure occurs less often for newspapers.

This argument has two notable implications:

- High-quality big city newspapers such as the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, and *Chicago Tribune* could probably increase circulation by repositioning themselves down-market. Doing so would cost them dearly in terms of national prestige, but would probably increase profitability. That these and other high quality papers generally resist downmarket pressure is probably best explained by an idealistic commitment either to prestige or to quality journalism or to some combination of both.
- The opportunity for profit does not translate into low quality journalism except in the presence of intense competition, as in the case of local television and a few large newspaper markets. In the absence of competition, journalists seem to be able to persuade owners to cast their fates with respectable “high quality” news.

5. **American newspapers, 1900 to 1950.** I have already presented evidence that news quality declines as competitive pressures increase. The argument that the latter causes the former would be stronger if I could run the

Figure 4. *The "Lewinsky quotient" for a sample of U.S. newspapers*



argument in the opposite direction – if, that is, I could find a case in which news quality increased as competitive pressure decreased. I believe there is one such case: Between about 1900 and 1950, competitive pressure within the newspaper business fell markedly. Although the evidence is less compelling as regards quality, there appears to have been an improvement in news quality during this same period.

Let us look first at the evidence of competitive pressure. According to data compiled by Emery and Emery (1996), the percentage of daily newspapers having no competitor was nearly flat from 1880 to 1920, but shot up suddenly in the decade of the 1920s from about 40 percent to about 80 percent. This is a remarkably sudden consolidation – and all the more so since it occurred in a time of general prosperity and generally high newspaper profits (Mott, 1962, p. 593). Moreover, although the Emery and Emery data do not continue beyond 1930, newspaper consolidation obviously continued, such that by 1950 the vast majority of newspapers had no competitors or at most one.

Different authors give different reasons for the great newspaper shakeout. My hunch, supported by some initial compilation of data, is that newspapers were, in effect, redefined in the two decades prior to consolidation. In 1880, the typical big city newspaper was four to eight pages long, mixed different kinds of news in haphazard fashion, and had three or four, and sometimes as many as 10 or 12, competitors. But about that time newspapers began to grow in size and depth, adding more pages, separate sections on sports, business, culture, and fashion, and, in general, becoming more like the multifaceted cultural fountainheads of today. But cities that could support three or four of the old four-pagers could not for long support so many multi-purpose papers. This led eventually to the somewhat odd situation in which many newspapers were being driven out of business but those that remained were larger and more profitable than ever.

In any case, the low point for competitive newspaper pressure was probably the 1920s. Profits were high, consolidation was proceeding rapidly, and – a key point – there was not yet significant competition from radio. In most cities, one or two newspapers ruled the news market.

The 1920s were also the time of one of the most important reform movements in the history of journalism. The decades in which the pressure for consolidation was building – and in which, therefore, competition was probably at its peak – were the time of “yellow,” “muckraking,” and generally sensationalist journalism. But beginning in about 1920, a reaction set in in the form of a movement for “objective” news reporting. “In its original sense,” writes Streckfess, “objectivity meant finding the truth through the rigorous method of the scientist” (1990, p. 975). In Schudson’s (1978) account, objectivity was likewise a more rigorous reporting method. According to Walter Lippmann, who is credited by Streckfess and Schudson with leading the movement for objectivity, a central purpose of the new creed was to make journalism less a “romantic art” and more an application of “trained intelligence” (cited in Streckfree, p. 981). Although these conceptions of objectivity are different from my notion of high quality news, they are clearly an attempt to increase the information content of news in relation to its entertainment value. The key question, then, is how the objectivity movement affected actual news content.

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<sup>3</sup> Total newspaper circulation has a substantively large and highly statistically significant effect on the probability that a tabloid competitor will emerge.

According to a careful content analysis of six big city newspapers over the period 1865 to 1955 (Stensaas, 1986), certain elements of objective journalism pre-dated the objectivity movement of the 1920s. Stensaas measures objectivity as the extent to which stories make assertions that are strictly “observable or verifiable” (p. 13). Thus, to be counted as objective, Stensaas required, on one hand, that stories avoid statements of the writer’s opinion and, on the other, that stories link assertions of fact either to concrete events or to statements by particular sources. Stensaas’s findings are shown in Figure 5, along with the Emery and Emery data on decline in newspaper competitiveness. As can be seen, the decline in competitiveness is not well-timed for explaining the increase in objectivity, as measured by Stensaas. Stensaas’ data thus fail to support my theoretical expectations.

INSERT FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE

Yet this is not the end of the story. For one thing, Stensaas’ data refer to six newspapers that survived well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century and may, for that reason alone, be atypical of the newspaper universe; by contrast, the Emery and Emery data refer to the universe of American daily newspapers, most of which were small. The two time series thus refer to rather different populations. For another, contemporary observers felt that the objectivity movement did make a difference. Writing in the *Yale Review* in 1931, Lippmann said it had brought about a “revolution” in news writing over the previous decade:

The most impressive event of the last decade in the history of newspapers has been the demonstration that the objective, orderly, and comprehensive presentation of news is a far more successful type of journalism to-day than the dramatic, disorderly, episodic type.<sup>4</sup>

This assertion merits further study, which I hope soon to supply. In the meantime, it remains clear that sometime between 1900, a time of famously sensationalist journalism, and about 1950, American newspapers toned down dramatically. During this same interval, the level of competition within the newspaper business also fell dramatically. This could be a coincidence, but it seems more likely that the decline in competition created the breathing space in which the new, duller style of newspapers could establish itself.

**6. Network TV news, 1969 to 1997.** We have seen in Figure 1 that local TV news, much of which goes head-to-head with network news in the same time slots, has grown dramatically, and that the most dramatic growth has come in the last 10 years. My theoretical expectation, therefore, is that network news will have declined in “quality” in the last decade. In a small test bore into the data, I asked a research assistant to use the Vanderbilt TV News Abstracts to assess the percentage of the network news broadcasts devoted to serious coverage of national government and foreign affairs. The results, based on the analysis of three months of programming in each of three years, are shown below:

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<sup>4</sup> Cited in Streckfess, p. 981.

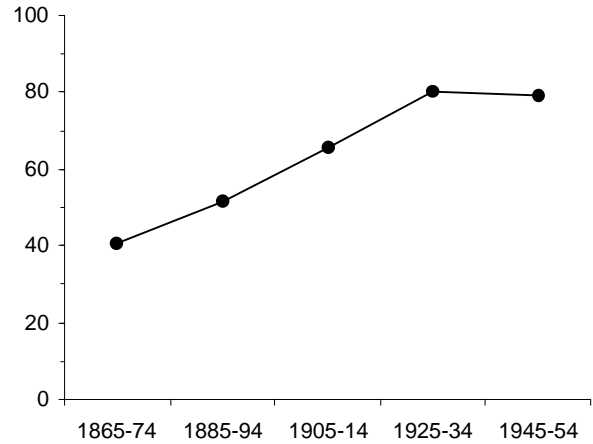
Figure 5. *Certain trends in news competition and news quality, 1865 - 1955*

*Percent of all daily newspapers having no daily competitor*



From *The American Press: An Interpretive History*, Michael Emery and Edwin Emery, 1996, p. 293.

*Percent of sample of big city daily newspaper stories rated as objective*



From *The Objective News Report: A Content Analysis of Selected U.S. Daily Newspapers for 1865 to 1954*, Harlan S. Stensaas, unpublished doctoral dissertation, 1986, University of Southern Mississippi, p. 57.

Percent of Network News Devoted to Stories about Government and Foreign Affairs			
	<u>1969</u>	<u>1981</u>	<u>1997</u>
ABC	62%	57	42
CBS	55	60	40
NBC	58	59	27
Average	58	59	36

As can be seen, there has been a marked decline in “news quality,” with all of the decline occurring after 1981. The timing of the change thus accords well with the increase in competitive pressure – though, obviously, more empirical work is needed to tie down the timing question.

Ken Auletta’s book on the Big Three networks in the 1980s, *Three Blind Mice*, points out that more than competitive pressure affected changes in network news content. Each of the networks was taken over by a new owner in the 1980s who was more concerned with profit than previous ones. Thus, the drive for profits can be considered an alternative explanation for the decline in news quality in this case. Yet, as Auletta also shows, the rise of new TV networks, including CNN and Fox, and cable programming occurred at the same general time as the ownership changes. In the absence of other evidence, we might therefore have to throw up our hands and say that we have no way of telling which factor is important. But inasmuch as news quality seems to have fallen wherever competition has intensified, and even in media, such as the *New York Times*, in which no ownership change has occurred, we can feel reasonably confident in ascribing causal importance to competitive pressure. The key factor has been well-described by NBC Anchor Tom Brokaw: “When I started out in the 1960’s,” he said in an interview, “there were effectively two network news programs, and at 6:30 P.M. people turned on either Huntley-Brinkley or Walter Cronkite and got their news for the day. And I’d like to have that back again.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Auletta’s book was his description of how network news journalists had managed to convince owners that their news shows should not have to make a profit, which they generally failed to do in the 1970s. Their argument was news had such special importance in a democracy that it ought to be exempted from the need to produce profits. They added, however, that their news programs were flagship operations whose prestige value did help the profitability of other network operations. These are exactly the kind of arguments that professionals of all kinds make when they want to get themselves exempted from market pressures. But when the new owners of the 1980s refused any longer to accept them, the journalists at first resisted, then squealed, then capitulated, as my general argument would suggest.

**7. Network newsmagazines, 1970 to present.** The newsmagazine 60 Minutes began broadcasting in the late 1960s and for some 20 years maintained a well-deserved reputation for high quality television journalism. From its prime time spot on Sunday night, it was also able to attract consistently large audiences. But about 1980, its success began to attract competitors, ABC’s 20/20 and NBC Magazine. The competition moved up another notch around

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<sup>5</sup> “Simpson Case Gives Cable An Edge on the Networks,” by Lawrie Mifflin, p. D1, *New York Times*, February 20, 1995.

1990, when Primetime Live, 48 Hours, Turning Point, Fox Files, and Eye-to-Eye began to appear. Thus, 60 Minutes has had two competitors since about 1980 and a half-dozen since 1990.

It is possible to estimate the news quality of these various shows by examining *TV Guide* listings, which often carry a description of story content. For example, “Discussion of the Shah of Iran’s Secret Police” and “President Nixon’s Vietnam Troop Withdrawal Plan” were listed as stories and rated as “5” on the news quality scale described earlier. (“5” represents “information useful readers in their roles as citizen decision-makers,” while “1” represents information that useful to readers purely as private individuals.) An “interview with Elizabeth Taylor” was rated as “1.”

The results obtained from this exercise are shown in Figure 6 and support my general argument in two ways: 1) The new entrants to a previously non-competitive field came in at distinctly lower levels of news quality, and 2) 60 Minutes initially resisted but was eventually forced to go downmarket to meet the competition. Note that the biggest decline in 60 Minutes news quality occurs only after 1994, at which point the level of competition had grown quite heavy.

INSERT FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE

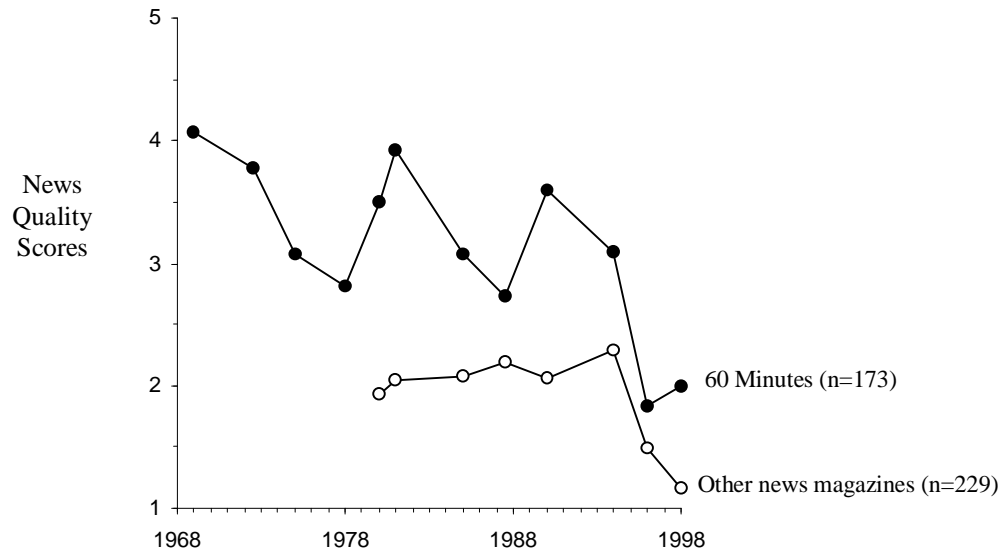
These results, which are based on the coding of 173 stories from 60 Minutes and 229 stories by its various competitors, cast the original 60 Minutes show in a very favorable light. In the decade or so in which 60 Minutes had no direct competition, the average quality score for its stories was about 3.8 on the same scale on which *New York Times* front page stories now average 4.4. This is a very respectable rating for a TV show attempting to reach a mass audience, but also very difficult to sustain in the face of heavy competition.

**8. Comparison of British and American TV News.** Since the BBC had a monopoly on national TV news coverage for some two decades and still retains a substantial subsidy, the expectation is that it would produce higher quality news than American network news. I have found no relevant data comparing British and American media and have not yet had time to collect any. However, Semetko et al. (1991) do make a systematic comparison of NBC coverage of the 1984 election with BBC coverage of the 1987 parliamentary election. Most of their evidence (much of it quantitative) has no bearing on my study, but their report makes it clear that the BBC provided more news with more information about the candidates’ positions on issues than their American counterpart, which makes the BBC news “higher quality” by my conception of quality.

Thin as this evidence is, there can be little doubt that the BBC provides higher quality news than its American counterparts, as expected by my theory.

**9. Comparison of British and American Newspapers.** The Semetko study also compares American and British newspaper coverage of the two elections, but, again, most of the evidence is irrelevant to the concerns of this paper. However, two pieces are relevant. The study examines the length of the average campaign story, which can be

Figure 6. *Trends in news quality among network news magazine shows*



taken as an indicator of depth of coverage. And it also provides counts of the number of straight news versus feature stories, which can be taken as an indicator of concern for information versus entertainment.

The comparisons are made for three classes of papers: 1) Typical American newspapers (*Indianapolis Star* and *Louisville Courier Journal*); 2) British broadsheets (*Times* and *Guardian*); and British tabs (*Sun*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Mail*). The two American newspapers compete in local markets which they monopolize, while all British papers compete in a frenzied national market. The expectation, therefore, is that the American newspapers will provide “higher quality” news, in the sense I have used this term.

At first glance, they do seem to. The two American papers ran stories that were slightly longer (at 20.3 inches) than the British broadsheets (19.4 inches) and much longer than those in the tabs (8.9 inches).<sup>6</sup> And the American papers ran a much higher ratio of straight election news to features news than either of the British groups (the ratios were 12:1, 2:1, and 5.4:1; see Table 8.3).

It would be foolish to maintain that two small American papers provide coverage that is, in any general way, better than that of the elite British press. At the same time, the data in the previous paragraph may well indicate that the British papers are being forced to work harder to hold market share than the monopolist American papers.

**10. Competition for the BBC.** After two decades of BBC monopoly, two commercial news programs have been introduced in Britain, one in the 1980s and one in the 1990s. This leads to two clear theoretical expectations: That the new entrants should provide “lower quality news” than the BBC, and that the presence of downmarket competition should pressure the BBC to go downmarket as well.

In a series of publications, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch make clear that the first expectation is supported (fn). The two new stations, one of which has a state subsidy, provide less election coverage and more “horse race” entertainment than the BBC – though, as Blumler and Gurevitch emphasize, the new programs are still well above the quality level of American network news. As they comment, “Britain’s approach to its 1997 campaign was still largely sheltered from those building commercial and competitive pressures that were so much more rampant in the U.S. system” (p. 19, “Americanization Reconsidered: UK-US Campaign Communication Comparisons Across Time, ND).

The second expectation is more difficult to evaluate. On the one hand, the two new stations have certainly brought pressure on the BBC to change, but, on the other, the BBC has not changed much if at all. Blumler and Gurevitch quote a news reader who says, “ There has been a growing perception, fed by market research, that many people are not digesting political reporting from the BBC as well as they might. It was not as accessible as it should be” (“Change in the Air: Campaign Journalism at the BBC in 1997,” p. 20, ND). But BBC programming remained as lengthy and issue-oriented as ever. Blumler and Gurevitch write,

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<sup>6</sup> See Table 8.2, p. 152.

An editor even spoke of the ‘fantastic luxury’ he enjoyed, since ‘Nobody would say that was a jolly interesting programme but the ratings went down.’ And when evidence of a significant drop in the audience became available, the newspeople tended to rationalize, arguing that they were not going to be deterred from doing their duty as public service broadcasters. In a producer’s words, “We are relaxed about it. We have been told from the top that the BBC has a duty to do this.” (ibid, p. 11).

The attitude seemed to be the same in the 1993 election, when one producer said that the BBC was “prepared to test ‘viewers’ boredom thresholds’ to do justice to the campaign” (1995, *Crisis of Public Communication*, p. 169).

I interpret these remarks as evidence that the BBC is, in fact, under pressure to go downmarket to meet its new competition, but has so far been successful in resisting the pressure. In classic manner of professionals, BBC journalists are prepared to be as boring as they have to be to uphold the standards of their profession (and class) – so long as the subsidy holds out.

#### CONCLUDING REMARKS

Shortly after General Electric bought the NBC network and its news division, GE’s CEO Jack Welch began getting entreaties from journalists who sought to convince him that the news division ought to be exempt from normal profit requirements because of the importance of its news mission for democracy. Welch’s response was that General Electric also produced commercial jet engines, that any failure in one of its big engines could kill hundreds of people, and that the jet engine business nevertheless had to meet the test of the market. Why, he asked, shouldn’t the NBC News Division meet that test as well? (Auletta, 1993).

Why indeed? That journalists should seek to get themselves outside the market is entirely understandable. That the vast majority of academics who study these matters should fail to notice the professional and class basis of journalists’ claims – which we routinely do<sup>7</sup> – is less so. I suppose, though, that the explanation must be that most academics share the professional interest of journalists in high quality news. That is, we are highly educated persons who have made a profession of studying politics. High quality news helps us to do our jobs, and it is also the kind of news we happen to enjoy.

In advancing this iconoclastic argument, I by no means assert that “high quality” news is bad. It may well be that force-feeding the population better news than it really wants to consume has an edifying effect that is good for mass participation and for democracy more generally. If forced to make a commitment, I would come down on this side of the issue.

But there may be costs of our collective academic blindness to the way in which journalistic self-interest affects news. One very small cost, in my opinion, is the way in which many analysts have sought to explain the rise in horserace journalism during elections, the decline of serious issue coverage and the increasing attention by

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<sup>7</sup> One person who is conspicuously free of this sin is Doris Graber, 1994; see also Anderson, 1996, for a study of how Soviet elites – who were as free from market constraints as any elite has ever been – made the language of politics positively unintelligible to their subjects.

journalists to gaffs and misstatements. The explanations most often given focus on the values of journalists, as if the journalists themselves were leading the downmarket change (e.g., Patterson, 1994; Lichter et al., 1986). This, I believe, is backwards. In the face of tremendous market pressure, journalists are adapting as best they can. To blame them for dumbing down the news because of their values seems to be an example of “the fundamental attribution error” – attributing causal significance for events to internal states rather than to external constraints.

A bigger cost is that academic analysts may end up reaching the wrong conclusions and urging the wrong kinds of reforms.<sup>8</sup> An example is the incident in the 1992 election in which Vice-President Dan Quayle attacked the television character Murphy Brown for having a child out of wedlock. The controversy over that remark, which extended over three nights on all three network news programs, gave the nation the only real discussion of “family values” that it has had in the 20 years of supposed debate. A highlight of the coverage was when one network juxtaposed a pig-tailed black girl, who asked a reporter why the Vice-president had attacked her mother who was such a good mother, with a group of white, middle-aged “Christian housewives” assembled in front of their suburban church and citing the Biblical invocation for men and women to live together. Yet this clash of symbolic characters, who looked as if they had been ordered up from central casting to embody the debate, has been widely criticized by intellectuals for trivializing politics when, as I think more likely, it elevated politics by making it more accessible than it customarily is.

The point of this paper, then, is not simply that market competition affects news quality. It is that there is a need to think more realistically about the nature of “news quality” in light of the interests of those who produce and those who consume news.

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<sup>8</sup> See McGerr, 1986 for an excellent study of how well-meaning but wrong-headed reformers can go astray and do more harm than good.

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