

HOMETOWN NEWS:
EXAMINING THE POSSIBILITY OF CORPORATE INFLUENCE
ON LOCAL MEDIA

THESIS

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DEDICATION

For my wife Renée without whose support none of this would have happened.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Lippmann (1922) observed that since people had limited opportunities to see important news events firsthand, they relied on the press to provide them information on what those events were like. The role of the press was to provide people a view of the world from which they could form pictures, or opinions, of those events in their minds. However, the press's view of the world may be influenced by outside sources and the effect of the media on public opinion may have significant implications beyond the "pictures" created in people's heads. There is evidence that the salience of issues on the media agenda is often the basis for public opinion about the performance in office of a particular politician (McCombs, 2002). The picture of reality created by the mass media may have implications for how personal attitudes are formed (McCombs). However, before media present an issue, those who form the news (reporters, editors, etc.) must make a judgment on how to present that news to the public. But what if that judgment is influenced from outside the newspaper, not overtly, but by biases already ingrained in the newsroom?

Agenda setting studies show that those who control the news media make decisions about what should, or should not, be reported to the public. This becomes the agenda of the media. As this agenda is presented to the public, a high level of correlation develops between the amount and kind of attention paid to a particular issue by the press,

and the level of importance attached to that issue by people in the community who received the information about it from newspapers, television, and radio. Agenda setting implies that the press tells people what they should think about and which issues are important (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

However, of studies published so far, none has explored the possible influence local businesses may have on the portrayal of news events that affect their interests in their “hometown” media outlets. “Hometown” media in this study is defined by its geographic setting. For example: the *Houston Chronicle* and Enron Corp. (Enron is based in Houston). Research has primarily concentrated on political issues and has neglected the media coverage of business and finance. However, in view of ongoing globalization, media coverage of economic developments, especially at the local level, plays a central role for politics and society.

Business and the economy occupy a central position in society. For instance, the perception of the state of the economy by the public—and as a consequence, the level of private spending—may be influenced by the media image of a particular economic situation. To what extent can business influence the formation of the media agenda and media content?

Objectives

This study will attempt to explore some of the questions concerning the relationship between business and the media:

- (a) Can local business influence on hometown media affect a newspaper's ability to portray business news events subjectively when compared with national media?
- (b) Is there a difference in positive or negative news coverage between local and national media?

As McCombs and Shaw (1993) argued, "... the media not only tell us what to think about, but also how to think about it, and, consequently, what to think" (p. 65). This research will explore the idea that hometown media may be influenced by positive local biases toward high-profile local businesses.

While hometown news media may prove not to be an overt supporter for local businesses, their possible neutrality or positive bias may show that there is a conflict with how national media cover the same event over time, possibly giving their local audiences an incomplete picture on local business news events.

Background

An Example of Business Influence on Media

In a recent news event, a member of the Augusta National Golf Club in Georgia, a local multi-million dollar business, influenced the *Augusta Chronicle* newspaper. The club member happened to be the owner and publisher of the *Chronicle*, Billy Morris (Shapiro, 2002).

The issue was whether the private club forfeits its constitutional rights to choose its own membership (the club currently admits "men only") when it hosts a very public

event that annually generates millions in profits for the club. According to Shapiro (2002), the debate has become intertwined with powerful and influential people in both the ranks of the club membership and the local media:

The club appears to get special treatment in the local newspaper, the *Augusta Chronicle*, owned by publisher William "Billy" Morris III, a longtime Augusta National member. According to sources, Morris recently called his editors and demanded that a long profile of Burk [Martha Burk, the chairman of the National Council of Women's Organizations who opposes the club policy] scheduled to appear on a Sunday front page be shoved back to pages 10 and 11. He killed the accompanying Burk question and answer sidebar. Morris also refused to run a recent piece by a writer who agreed in principle with Augusta's position, but nevertheless urged the club to give in and admit a woman for the good of the game and the tournament. (pg. D01)

While this may be an extreme case of local media trying to control a local debate and take away opposing voices, it illustrates a fundamental problem of media control. This issue sets the tone for two other news events that are the focus of this study: the Salt Lake Olympic Committee bribery scandal as it was reported in the *Salt Lake Tribune* in 1998 and the bankruptcy of the Enron Corp. in Houston, Texas, and how that story was reported in the *Houston Chronicle* in 2001. While neither of these events appear as overt as the *Augusta Chronicle* story (where a publisher has taken control of how a newsroom reports a particular story), they may show an aspect of how the media is influenced by local high-profile business organizations.

The Salt Lake Tribune

The *Salt Lake Tribune* is Utah's largest daily newspaper with a daily circulation of 135,619 and a Sunday circulation of 161,488 ("MediaNews," 2000). The newspaper is currently corporately owned by MediaNews Group, the seventh-largest newspaper company in the United States, situated throughout California, the Rocky Mountain region and the Northeast. MediaNews Group operates forty-seven daily newspapers in ten states with combined daily and Sunday circulation of approximately 1.7 million and 2.4 million, respectively ("MediaNews About," 2000).

The *Salt Lake Tribune* newspaper started in the late 1800s as a movement to oppose the reach of the Mormon Church. Four magazine editors joined forces to publish what was then named the *Mormon Tribune* in 1870 after the *Deseret News*, Salt Lake City's other daily newspaper, urged church members to boycott their *Utah Magazine*. They replaced their magazine with the new weekly newspaper. Later that year, "Mormon" was dropped from the title, and in 1871 the paper was renamed the *Salt Lake Daily Tribune and Utah Mining Gazette*, which soon after was changed to the *Salt Lake Tribune* (Bennion, 1993).

The paper struggled for several years until three publishers from Kansas bought it in 1873. U.S. Senator Thomas Kearns, in partnership with David Keith, bought the newspaper in 1901. In 1919 Kearns's heirs bought out the Keiths, obtaining majority ownership of the Tribune (Bennion, 1993).

By 1946, circulation of the *Tribune's* competitor, the *Deseret News*, was down to 12,583. With the support of the Mormon Church, the *News* launched a promotional

campaign to counter the *Tribune*'s success. One of the *Tribune*'s largest advertisers, ZCMI, withdrew its support and the paper's profits evaporated. It was rumored in 1950 that the Mormon church had bought the *Tribune*. Instead, *Tribune* publisher John F. Fitzpatrick forged the agreement that created the Newspaper Agency Corp. (NAC) in 1952, which prints, circulates, and sells ads for both papers. The two papers formed a nascent joint operating agreement (JOA), with the *Tribune* publishing in the morning, the church-sponsored *Deseret News* in the afternoon (Bagley, 2000).

Tribune circulation in 1993 stood at 121,165 for the daily edition, and 156,013 on Sunday. The Kearns-Tribune Corporation maintained holdings in other publishing companies, in cable television, and in non-media enterprises, as well (Bennion, 1993).

According to Bagley (2000), recent maneuvers by the Mormon Church to acquire the company that prints and distributes *The Salt Lake Tribune* drew national attention. Media analysts wondered whether this move would, "... herald an end to independent journalism and the demise of the long peace between *The Tribune* and the *Deseret News* in which *The Trib* reported the news and the *News* reported the gospel" (Bagley, pg. B1).

Scherer (2003) states that the Mormon Church is a powerful force in politics, local media, and culture in Utah. The church claims membership of about two-thirds of the state's residents, and annual church revenues estimated at \$6 billion. The church is Utah's biggest employer and the largest landowner in Salt Lake City. Roughly 90 percent of the state legislature is Mormon, as are the governor, the House and Senate delegations, and a majority of the state's supreme court and federal judiciary. In addition to the *Deseret News*, the church owns the state's largest television and news radio station (Scherer).

In 1997 the owners of the *Tribune* arranged the temporary transfer of ownership of the paper to cable company Tele-Communications Inc. The descendants of Senator Kearns owned the majority of shares in the Tribune, several smaller newspapers, and the cable company. On the insistence of the McCarthey family, one branch of Senator Kearns's heirs, the deal allowed for editorial control of the newspaper to remain with the family for five years, after which they had the exclusive right to repurchase the paper at market value. The deal seemed ironclad at the time; however, "With the ink still drying on the agreement, TCI's president, Leo Hindery, began shopping the paper around. He saw it as a political liability in Utah, an institution that clashed with the politically powerful Mormon church" (Scherer, 2003, ¶ 24).

Hindery proposed selling the *Tribune* to the *Deseret News*, noting that among the benefits was "... the good will we will have preserved with the Mormon Church and the political leadership of the State" (Scherer, 2003, ¶ 24). However, the church decided against owning the *Tribune* for fear of a public backlash against church ownership of the state's independent newspaper. The church brokered a deal in which the McCartheys would keep control of the *Tribune* newsroom while giving the church indirect control over the newsroom budget and joint operating agreement. The move backfired as the church, which still owned the *Deseret News*, used its political and legal muscle to prevent the resale of the *Tribune* back to the McCartheys, whom they viewed as hostile. Instead, TCI sold the paper to Dean Singleton's MediaNews Group in 2001 (Scherer).

The McCarthey family owned and operated the *Tribune* during the time this study takes place; however, battles over ownership were in progress as the Salt Lake Olympic Committee scandal surfaced in Utah.

The Salt Lake Olympic Organizing Committee

The Salt Lake Organizing Committee was created in 1985 to bid on holding the 1998 Winter Olympic Games in Salt Lake City. The bid committee established a financial assistance program, described as a "National Olympic Committee Support Program," purportedly aimed at helping developing countries. The program was established in early 1992, after the close loss Salt Lake City experienced with respect to the 1998 Olympic Winter Games, which were awarded to Nagano, Japan (Swift, 1999).

Rumors abounded that Nagano officials had given expensive gifts to IOC members to ensure a winning bid. In response to this defeat, Salt Lake committee members used the same tactics the Japanese had used with success. Scholarships, trips, medical care, and gifts were reportedly given to IOC members and their families in an attempt to cement Salt Lake City's bid for the 2002 Winter Olympics (Swift, 1999).

It is not clear exactly to what degree the existence of the program was known by the bid committee as a whole. It seems, from the evidence given by other committee members, that Thomas Welch (the president of the bid committee and later president of the SLOC) administered the program until his resignation in 1997 (Swift, 1999). David Johnson, then executive vice-president of the SLOC and one of the few members of the bid committee who survived the transition from bid committee to Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games, was aware of the existence of the program and active in its implementation (Swift).

Welch, a corporate lawyer and vice president of Smith's Food at the time, joined the committee as volunteer chairman on a part-time basis when the committee was

formed. He left his corporate post in 1989 and began working full-time for the bid committee. Welch resigned as SLOC president in August 1997 after public pressure over a domestic abuse incident (“Olympic Scandal,” 2002).

Johnson worked for the Utah Office of Community and Economic Development as a government contractor, then as the Utah Sports Foundation director. Johnson joined the bid committee in 1988, becoming a senior vice president in 1989. Johnson was fired from the committee in January 1999 by then-president Frank Joklik after accusations of bribing International Olympic Committee members surfaced (“Olympic Scandal,” 2002).

The Salt Lake Tribune and the Salt Lake Olympic Committee Bribery Scandal

This first part of the project will examine how the *Salt Lake Tribune* newspaper reported a national news event, the Salt Lake Olympic Committee bribery scandal, as it occurred locally in 1998.

In late 1998, allegations emerged that International Olympic Committee members were bribed for their votes by the Salt Lake Olympic Committee to favor Salt Lake City as the site of the 2002 Winter Olympics (“Boosters Paid,” 1998).

On November 24, 1998, local television station KTVX in Salt Lake City reported that local Olympic boosters paid thousands of dollars for scholarships for relatives of International Olympic Committee members. The station stated that the money was paid before and after the city won its bid in 1995 to host the 2002 Winter Games (“Boosters Paid,” 1998). The next day the media converged on Salt Lake City to investigate the allegations of possible bribery, reporting that local Olympic committee members paid thousands of dollars in scholarships for IOC members' families, including Sonia

Essomba, the daughter of the deceased IOC member for Cameroon, during the bid for the 2002 Games (“Boosters Paid”). As the scandal grew, reports of lavish gifts offered by members of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee included cash, college scholarships, medical treatment, and trips (“Justice Department,” 1998).

By January, an International Olympic Committee investigation had accused 13 Olympic officials of accepting bribes from Salt Lake City organizers (“Key Developments,” 1999). Two top Salt Lake City Olympic Committee officials—President and CEO Frank Joklik and Vice President David Johnson—were forced to step aside, and the committee underwent a sweeping reorganization (“Top Salt Lake,” 1999). The U.S. Internal Revenue Service and the U.S. Department of Justice also launched criminal probes (“Justice Department,” 1998).

The purpose of this research is to examine the possible failure of the *Salt Lake Tribune* to report without bias the bribery scandal involving the Salt Lake Olympic Committee, and the International Olympic Committee. Did the *Tribune* show bias toward, or ignore negative news on, the Salt Lake Olympic Committee during the bribery scandal’s early days when compared to national media?

The Houston Chronicle

The *Houston Chronicle* is among the nation's ten largest newspapers and the largest in Houston, Texas. It has a daily readership of more than 1.2 million and Sunday readership of more than 1.7 million (“Chronicle History,” 2002). The *Houston Chronicle* is owned and operated by the Hearst Corporation, a multi-media conglomerate that owns twenty newspapers, seventeen magazines, fifteen business publications, six magazine

distribution companies, a news service, television and radio stations, and joint ventures with other media conglomerates such as Disney and General Electric. Hearst is also involved in real estate, banking, and media technology companies (“Who Owns,” 2003).

Marcellus Foster, a young reporter and oil entrepreneur, published the first edition of the *Houston Chronicle* in 1901. The newspaper's circulation at the end of its first month of publication reached 4,378, and just one year later Foster bought and consolidated another Houston paper, the *Daily Herald*. By 1904, the *Chronicle's* circulation grew so much that it inaugurated a Sunday morning edition that carried 44 pages of news and advertising. In 1908, Jesse Jones, a leading builder in Houston, was hired by Foster to build a 10-story building to accommodate the *Chronicle's* growth in exchange for part interest in the paper (“Chronicle History,” 2002).

In 1926 Foster sold his remaining interest in the *Chronicle* to Jones, who became the sole owner. By 1940 *Chronicle* circulation was at 117,000 daily and 118,000 on Sunday. In 1949 John T. Jones became president of the *Chronicle*, succeeding his uncle, Jesse Jones, who remained the paper's publisher until his death in 1956. Before his death, Jesse Jones transferred ownership of the *Chronicle* to Houston Endowment Inc., a charitable foundation established by Jones and his wife (“Chronicle History,” 2002).

In 1986, because of the Tax Reform Act of 1969, the Houston Endowment was forced to sell the *Chronicle*. The Hearst Corporation bought the *Chronicle*, paying the highest price ever paid for a newspaper at that time — \$415 million. In 1995, the *Houston Post*, the *Chronicle's* largest rival, ceased operations, leaving Houston the nation's largest one-newspaper city (“Chronicle History,” 2002).

Enron Corporation

Enron was one of the world's leading energy, commodities, and services companies and had revenues of \$101 billion in 2000 before its collapse and bankruptcy in 2001 ("Enron Fact," 2003). The company was arguably the most influential corporation in Houston at the time, with CEO Ken Lay even considering a run for mayor before the company fell down around him (Sherman, 2002). Lay and other Enron executives were frequent topics of *Chronicle* interviews and feature stories on the company's success.

Enron was formed in July 1985 as a result of the merger of Houston Natural Gas and InterNorth of Omaha, Nebraska. Enron divided its business into three core areas: Enron Wholesale Services (Enron's worldwide wholesale businesses, including the marketing and delivery of physical commodities and financial and risk management services), Enron Energy Services (Enron's retail business, which provided integrated energy and facility management outsourcing solutions to commercial and industrial customers worldwide), and Enron's Global Assets, which included pipelines, Portland General Electric, international power, and pipeline and distribution operations ("Enron Fact," 2003).

Enron, and the *Houston Chronicle*: Corporate Influence on Local Media

This research will examine the possible bias of the *Houston Chronicle* newspaper in reporting the downturn and bankruptcy of the Enron Corp.

When Houston-based Enron was racing toward extinction in the fall of 2001, major media were like archeologists hoping for a Rosetta stone, the magic key to unlock the mysteries of the company's intricate financial dealings. Everyone wanted to break the

next big story on Enron's failure. However, one news source was noticeably absent from the treasure hunt: the *Houston Chronicle*.

According to Howard Kurtz (2002), a *Washington Post* staff writer, when a big story breaks in a newspaper's hometown, local reporters often outshine the national press. A big factor, according to Kurtz, is the paper's proximity to the story and intimate knowledge of the local subject. In the case of the *Houston Chronicle* Kurtz states:

Some observers say the restrained approach stems in part from the close connections the paper had with Lay. "He's really thought of as one of their own," says Richard Connelly, columnist for the alternative *Houston Press*, who calls the paper's past coverage "fawning." Lay, says Connelly, "is part of the same Houston establishment that the *Chronicle* is so deeply a part of." Among other things, Lay worked with *Chronicle* executives on charitable projects and helped lead the battle for a new baseball stadium (named Enron Field, in exchange for cash) strongly backed by the Hearst-owned paper. (pg. C-1)

Was the *Chronicle* influenced by outside sources to report positively on the collapse of Enron? Did the newspaper show bias toward, or ignore negative news on, Enron during its collapse and subsequent bankruptcy because the company was Houston based?

Organization of Thesis

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The first chapter introduces the objectives of the study and provides the background material on the two news events cited.

Chapter 2 looks at past literature written on the topic and establishes the theoretical grounding of this study.

Chapter 3 discusses the methodology of the study. The time frame for the study, how the samples were collected, and issues of coding are clarified here. Also, an explanation of the validity of the data is discussed.

Chapter 4 presents the finding of the statistical analysis of the data. The statistical results are presented in both a table format and a graphic representation with a bar graph.

Chapter 5 provides an overview of the study. A summary of the research and analysis of the results are presented. Conclusions drawn from the findings are offered. Weaknesses of the study and suggestions for further research are discussed.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

The idea that the media set the order of importance of issues seems obvious; the news media turn their attention to what they consider newsworthy, and what they turn their attention to is by definition news (Brewster & McCombs, 1996). People perceive as the big issues of the day those issues that the media focus on (Brewster & McCombs). In some cases, organizations and individuals play the media at their own game by taking advantage of news values (McCombs, 1997). Some political parties and pressure groups seem to have acquired great skill in news management (McCombs). In this study, business influence is the focus. This influence may be passive, and media may be unaware that it is even happening. However, by ignoring the negative side of an issue when one is present, do media present a biased view to their audiences? What happens when media ignore the negative aspects of a news event? The limitations of this research preclude an answer on whether the public agenda is affected. However, it may show that biased coverage of a news event is present.

To explore the depth to which media bias of hometown corporate entities may be embedded into the culture of news organizations, this study will examine how corporate power, bias, framing, and even agenda setting might work to produce a one-sided view of local issues. However, to explore this process, we must discuss each theory individually.

Corporate power and the media

Lee and Solomon (1990) argue that many Americans, 69 percent from a 1989 Harris Poll, are uncomfortable with the extent of corporate power over different aspects of their lives. They also argue that public opinion of corporate power would be worse if media portrayed business in an unbiased way. The argument is that business has an undue influence on the media when it comes to critical reporting of business issues. The authors also maintain that because of corporate ownership of media that the “fairness” of reporting on business news is inherently one-sided (Lee and Solomon).

Lewis (2002) asserts that media haven’t been very successful in uncovering the lapses of corporations before the mischief is complete. “In many cases it [media] has compounded the problem by engaging in superficial cheerleading and personality-driven business reporting that, in hindsight, portrayed some villains as heroes. In other cases, coverage has been confined to what has been described as ‘coming out of the woods after the battle to shoot the wounded’” (Lewis, ¶ 3).

According to Lewis (2002), corporate power has just as much a need for oversight as government as corporate influence continues to grow on all parts of our life. He reasons that our forefathers would have recognized the need for press oversight on big business if the excesses of big business were as prevalent then as they are today. “Recent corporate failures and misdeeds and the scope of the resulting damage to individuals and the economy serve as a warning that the press needs to be just as adept at uncovering corporate malfeasance as at ferreting out governmental wrongdoing” (Lewis, ¶ 6). However, as Lewis claims, media are now part of large corporations dependent on revenue from outside sources, namely big business. These public companies are

dependent on growth to satisfy shareholder value by keeping operating costs low and earnings high. Lewis contends that this potential conflict of interest gets worse as media companies get bigger.

Overholser (2001) makes the case that newspapers are important businesses in their communities, shaping what people know and don't know and having a tremendous impact on other businesses through their reporting and advertising practices. Moreover, Goozner (2000) asserts that "cheerleading" reporting has taken over critical investigations of big business:

Coverage of the current prosperity can read like a sports page when the home team is on a roll: cheerleading can drown out the occasional story pointing out weaknesses in the squad or the challenges coming up in the schedule. Journalistic scorn is reserved for the players—or in this case stocks—that don't make their numbers. (§ 4)

Carlson (2002) found that in addition to newspapers, business magazines also served as, "... fawning cheerleaders for the hotshot capitalists of the dot-com era, publishing countless puff pieces portraying them as brilliant, altruistic, heroic geniuses" (§ 1). Now, according to Carlson, because of the collapse of Enron, those same magazines are on the attack, "... excoriating these once-deified entrepreneurs as crooked, mendacious, rapacious robber barons" (§ 2).

Smith (2002) found that media helped create the "new economy", an environment so enthusiastic, beyond reality, and pro-business that anything was possible—even Enron's fantastic growth. Moreover, according to Smith, media shied away from being a

“nay-sayer” on the economy for fear of losing readership and business advertisers. Thompson (2002) stated that many reporters gave what he calls a “free ride” to businesses that never showed a profit during the gold rush of the dot-com era, smitten by what he called a powerful “Stockholm Syndrome.” “... Journalists I knew wanted to jump camp. They spent their evenings in bed staring at the ceiling, gnashing their teeth about the cocky 20-something insta-millionaires they'd just profiled, and angsting over whether to join ‘this hot new startup’ they'd heard about” (Thompson, ¶ 9).

Bias and the Media

According to Belsey and Chadwick (1992), objectivity can be portrayed as a view agreed on or an argument unaffected by outside influences. This interpretation is an ideal and not meant for objectivity in journalism because according to them journalism can't be objective because journalists already bring biases and prejudices with them to the story. This is because a story, according to Belsey and Chadwick, is already biased before the journalist writes a word because their interpretation is slanted by their own points of view. Thus, according to Belsey and Chadwick, a news story may never be truly objective.

Bozell and Baker (1990) state that news media claim to be objective, that they report objectively, and that a reporter's personal political viewpoint has no more effect on journalists than on other professions. But they argue that, “... to report on abortion or taxes or national defense is not like counting the clicks on a Geiger counter or calculating the distance to the moon. Journalism is inherently subjective; a journalist's approach to a story invariably reflects his opinions” (p. 26). Lotz (1991) states that when reporters write

a story they have to “compress reality” into a certain limited space. “... Distortion inevitably results, particularly when some parts are deliberately highlighted and others completely left out, which happens in every news story written” (p. 67).

Another factor is personal contact between the journalist and the source. Gandy (1991) argues that contact between journalists and their sources, “... may lead to some degree of personal identification, which may result in hesitancy on the part of those journalists to reveal information that might harm or otherwise erect a barrier between them and their friends” (p. 269). Goldenberg (1975, as cited in Gandy 1991) suggests that the bond between the writer and his subject becomes stronger with constant contact, causing a close “friendship” type relationship to develop in the writing

McChesney (2001) states that in order to avoid the “taint of partisanship”, journalists make official or credentialed sources the only foundation for their news stories, giving news an “establishment bias”. Bennett (1996) argues that bias in reporting is linked to standards in professional journalism that were actually meant to prevent bias and that those standards further distort a writer’s perspective. Bennett contends that many journalists have substituted the word “fairness” for the often-used “objectivity” as a more reasonable reporting standard.

Weaver (1994) maintains that this “traditional posture of objectivity” news media perpetrate should be abolished since, “... they are tools by which audiences are manipulated, lies are propagated, and journalists deny responsibility for their stories’ faithfulness to real life” (p. 124). Weaver argues that news media should disclose how their reporters created their stories. Weaver also argues that journalism must have a point of view because it allows the reporter to understand and communicate what the essence

of the story is. This point of view is possibly what the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Houston Chronicle* were lacking. By trying to stay “objective”, they may have missed fundamental clues to unraveling the Salt Lake Olympic Committee’s and Enron’s unethical financial dealings.

As to bias in general by so-called “right-wing” or “liberal” media, many media experts argue that, while bias may be present, the impact may not be as harmful as some believe. Shaw (2003) agrees that media are biased but argues that, “... I don't think most reporters and editors are biased in the way that our most virulent critics suggest. We don't, consciously or subconsciously, slant our stories to fit our ideology” (§ 3). Shaw also argues that neither conservative media owners nor liberal reporters attempt to impose their ideology on news stories.

Shaw (2003) believes that other biases, “... the individual and institutional preference for change, conflict, bad news and sensationalism are far more common, and far more damaging, than any kind of intermittent, inadvertent ideological bias” (§ 5). As soft news has taken up more space in newspaper news sections, public affairs and business coverage has dwindled. “... The problem with the media's political coverage isn't bias. It's shrinkage and superficiality. I worry far more about the tarting up and dumbing down of our news media than I do about any ideological infiltration” (Shaw, § 10).

Framing

Media framing is how an event is packaged and presented in the media. A media frame is a “... central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and

suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (Severin and Tankard, 2001, p. 277). The theory is that framing can affect the way an audience interprets an issue. This means that if the media define a local business failure as nothing more than a “hiccup”, rather than as the scandal or failure that it is, the public may perceive the issue in that way. Ghanem (1997) argues that framing is a structural bias that results from the selection process that takes place in the newsroom.

According to Severin and Tankard (2001), news media have the power to direct and sustain public attention through the use of framing. It was recognized among some researchers that, “... negative aspects might contribute to problem awareness more than positive or neutral aspects” (Brosius & Keppinger, 1990, p. 188). Schoenbach and Semetko (1992) studied the media coverage of a German national election and found that framing an issue as positive or negative had an impact on the public’s perception of how important that issue was. In some persuasion research, positive and negative messages are considered two basic approaches to induce a person’s cognitive and behavioral change. These two approaches were termed “threats and promises” (Simons, 1974, p. 180), or “hope and fear” (Burgoon et al., 1981, p. 168).

According to Rhodes (1999), the selection and highlighting of certain story elements makes the manufacture and packaging of news efficient and the results digestible for the reader. Hendrickson and Tankard (1997) discussed how the journalistic processes of newsgathering for publication “... result in an inevitable narrowing of the news frame, and ultimately of readers’ views of events and issues” (p. 39).

Ghanem (1997) also argues that “proximity” and “human interest” might make a reader or viewer identify more readily with what the news story contains (p. 12). For

example, reporting by the *Houston Chronicle* in the beginning of the scandal concentrated on the effects a possible downturn would have on Enron's employees and the people of Houston in general and trivialized the actual accounting scandal. According to Hall (1981), personalizing the news isolates the reader or viewer from much of the relevant social and institutional context.

Ghanem (1997) identified four facets of framing that relate directly to the attribute level of agenda setting: the topic of the news item; presentation; cognitive attributes; and affective attributes (p. 8). Takeshita (1997) argues that framing and agenda setting research are exploring the same issue, "The reality-definition function of the media" (p. 24). However, while framing may define reality, agenda setting pushes that reality forward to the public.

Agenda Setting

Agenda setting theory shows that those who control the news media make decisions about what should, or should not, be reported to the public. This becomes the agenda of the media. As this agenda is presented to the public, a high correlation develops between the amount and kind of attention paid to a particular issue by the press, and the level of importance of that issue by people in the community who received the information about it from newspapers, television, and radio. Agenda setting implies that the press tells people what they should think about and which issues are important (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995).

Agenda setting can be broken down into three distinct areas and can be thought of as the "agenda setting process", according to Rogers, Dearing, and Bregman (1993, p.

69). This includes the “media” agenda as discussed above, the “public” agenda, which is the importance of issues to the public; and the “policy” agenda, which is the agenda of the government or our elected officials; all of which seek to offer an explanation of how social change occurs in society (Rogers, et al.).

Political and social scientists recognized early on that media had an effect on the public. Davis (1952) wrote about how crime news in Colorado newspapers had a social effect on the local population. Berelson and Lazarsfeld (1954) looked at voting trends in the public arena and possible effects by the media as a small part of their book, *Voting*, but found minimal effects. In 1955 Breed discussed how newspaper “opinion leaders” and standardization by the media affected the public.

Cohen (1963) stated that the press:

... may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about. The world will look different to different people, depending on the map that is drawn for them by writers, editors, and publishers of the paper they read. (p. 13)

McCombs and Shaw (1972) believed mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on their news agendas to the public agenda. The original theory McCombs and Shaw cultivated was that data suggested a “... relationship between the emphasis placed on different campaign issues by the media and the judgments of the voters as to the salience and importance of various campaign topics” (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 269). Their hypothesis predicted a cause-and-effect relationship between media

content and voter perception, particularly, a match between the media's agenda and the public's agenda later on (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

What they found was that the rankings provided by "uncommitted" voters aligned closely with the media's agenda. They believed that the hypothesized agenda setting function of the media caused the correlation between the media and public ordering of priorities (McCombs & Shaw, 1972).

McCombs and Shaw also found that the major information source for personal agenda setting was the news of the campaign reported by the television networks and newspapers, not paid political advertisements, or even interpersonal discussions as they had originally thought. "Both the press and other people help share our ideas. Only sometimes the press seems to shout a bit louder. Or perhaps it is only more repetitious" (Shaw & McCombs, 1977, as cited in Lowery & DeFleur, 1995, p. 282).

McCombs and Shaw found that there are three major factors where people are influenced by the media agenda: the voters' interest in the content (perceived relevance); the degree of uncertainty concerning the issues; and the effort required to locate a reliable source of information (Lowery & DeFleur, 1995). Perceived relevance and degree of uncertainty were formed into a concept called "need for orientation" by the research team. They found that those voters with a high need for orientation ranked highest for agenda setting influences (Shaw & McCombs, 1977).

Zucker (1978) wanted to find out why the correlation between agenda setting effects was relatively weak. He hypothesized that earlier studies assumed that the agenda setting effect would be the same for all issues. What he found was that agenda setting may take place for unobtrusive issues but not for obtrusive issues and that the

obtrusiveness of an issue is an important concept in agenda setting. In a leap of theory building, he suggested that if the only way people find out about unobtrusive issues in agenda setting is through the media, or by talking to other people who have been exposed to the issue through the media, then agenda setting and the two-step flow of communication have a combining effect (Zucker).

Gilberg, Eyal, McCombs and Nicholas (1980) studied whether media set the presidential agenda or the president set the media's agenda. What they found, that the media set the president's [Jimmy Carter] agenda, initially surprised them. However, in a subsequent study (McCombs, Gilbert, Eyal, 1982) on President Nixon, they found the opposite to be true, that the president set the media's agenda, suggesting that situational factors need to be taken into account when accomplishing agenda setting studies (Severin & Tankard, 2001).

Iyengar, Peters, and Kinder (1982) conducted an experiment to test the agenda setting hypothesis in a lab setting. They used videotapes of network newscasts and altered them by editing out some stories and adding others, allowing them to manipulate what was shown to different subjects. After viewing the tapes, the subjects were asked a series of questions on the importance of specific issues. While the evidence wasn't overwhelming, there were indications that the media agenda had an effect on what the most important problem was to the subjects. However, they did discover another important effect of the agenda setting process: priming. Priming occurs when the media focus on certain issues and not others, altering the opinions by which people judge election candidates (Iyengar, et al.).

Gladys and Kurt Lang (1983) looked at the connection between the media and public opinion during the Watergate crisis in the 1970's. They argued that the agenda setting definitions as they were outlined at the time were too narrow and needed to be expanded to cover how the media, government, and the public influence each other in determining which issues were on the agenda. They called this concept "agenda building," suggesting that putting an issue on the public agenda takes time and goes through several processes. They also found that the way media frame an issue, the way they describe it, and the role of celebrities in commenting on an issue can have an important impact.

Shoemaker, and Reese (1991) investigated how the media agenda was set, dividing their findings into five major categories: influences from individual media workers; influences from media routines; organizational influences on content; influences on content from outside of media organizations; and the influence of ideology (p. 184). They called these five categories the "hierarchy of influences," with ideology on the top and filtering down through the other levels (p. 184).

Research Questions

This study will look into the role bias may have had on the reporting of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee bribery scandal in the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the Enron accounting scandal in the *Houston Chronicle*.

RQ₁: Over a set period, will articles concerning a local business scandal from a local news source be more positive in tone than articles from a national news source?

RQ₂: Will articles published by a national news source be more negative in tone in coverage of a local business scandal than same-day stories published by a local news source?

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

To answer the research questions this study will look at the two major hometown media events previously discussed.

The first news event to be studied is the Salt Lake Olympic Committee bribery scandal in 1998. This part of the study will explore how the local *Salt Lake Tribune* newspaper reported the bribery scandal as opposed to how national media, in particular the *Associated Press Newswire*, covered the same event. The methodological time frame from which the sample size was constructed is from November 24 to December 31, 1998. Research consisted of in-depth Internet database searches of newspaper articles related to the Salt Lake Olympic Committee bribery scandal when the story broke in media (television station KTVX) on November 24, 1998 to when the story attained prominence in all media on December 31, 1998 in the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the national *Associated Press Newswire*.

For the *Salt Lake Tribune* a Dow Jones Interactive database search using “Olympic” as a keyword was initiated that resulted in a total article count of 145. Each article was read for relevance to the Salt Lake Olympic Committee scandal, and unrelated references and minor articles were deleted (less than a paragraph or one-word mention). This search resulted in 57 articles published in the *Salt Lake Tribune* on which to base the study.

For the *Associated Press Newswire* a Dow Jones Interactive database search using “Olympic” as keyword was initiated that resulted in a total article count of 97. Each article was read for relevance to the Salt Lake Olympic Committee scandal, sifting through and deleting unrelated references and minor articles (less than a paragraph or one word mention). This search resulted in 74 articles published in the *Associated Press Newswire*.

The second news event studied was the bankruptcy of the Enron Corp. in Houston, Texas, in 2001 and how the city’s local newspaper, the *Houston Chronicle*, reported the event as opposed to national media, in this study, the *Wall Street Journal*. The methodological time frame from which this sample was constructed is much larger than the first sample because of the length of time in which the Enron scandal unfolded and runs from January 1 to December 31, 2001. Research consisted of in-depth Internet database searches of newspaper articles related to the Enron Corp. that were published in the *Houston Chronicle* and the national *Wall Street Journal*.

For the *Houston Chronicle*, a Lexis-Nexis Academic database search using “Enron” as a keyword was initiated that resulted in a total article count of 2,082. Each article was read for relevance to the Enron Corp., sifting through and deleting references to Enron Field (Houston’s professional baseball park named by the company for a fee), minor articles (less than a paragraph or one word mention), and Enron as a minor mention in a larger article. This search resulted in a total of 312 articles in the *Houston Chronicle* on which to base this study.

For the *Wall Street Journal*, a Dow Jones Interactive database search using “Enron” as keyword was initiated that resulted in a total article count of 526. Each article

was read in the same way as the first study except for mentions in a stock report or listing (due to the financial focus of the *Journal*). This search resulted in a total of 166 articles published in the *Wall Street Journal* on which to base the national study.

Coders

Two coders were used to supply data for the tone of the articles. The coders were given five sample articles each and asked to practice with the researcher to achieve an understanding of how to code for the study. Both coders received articles from all sample papers and both sample time periods.

Investigation of an article's tone required coders to assign a value to whether an article depicted the local business in either a positive, negative, or neutral tone. A five-point scale was used that assigned the value of 1 for positive, 3 for neutral, and 5 for negative.

Coders were instructed to answer these questions when reviewing each story: Positive: Does the story have an overall positive tone while downplaying any negative news on the scandal? Negative: Was the story negative in tone, not playing favorites, and delving deeper into the problems facing the business? Neutral: Did the story present both sides of the issue, giving balanced coverage of both the positive and negative aspects? While this is a subjective technique for measuring bias—some stories are obvious while others may be harder to classify—overall ratios of positive-to-negative show general trends.

Each story was coded, counted, and added to a data set for statistical evaluation. Scott's Pi was calculated using all stories to gauge intercoder reliability with a resulting satisfactory level of agreement of ($\pi = 0.91$).

Time Frame

The sample selection, analysis of data, coding, and statistical analysis for the *Houston Chronicle* and Enron scandal was conducted during the spring and summer of 2002. The sample selection, analysis of data, coding, and statistical analysis for the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the Salt Lake Olympic Committee scandal was conducted in the fall of 2002.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

All statistics were computed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. A positive to negative Cross-Tabulation of each news source and trends in positive-to-negative coverage were computed first. Secondly, a Pearson chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing the frequency of each value from positive to negative between each news source. A Pearson chi-square tests whether or not two variables are independent of each other. A significant chi-square test result indicates that the two variables are not independent. Finally, an independent-samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean scores between each news source in both studies. This test compares the means of two samples, normally from randomly assigned groups.

Salt Lake Tribune and the Associated Press Newswire

The *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Associated Press Newswire* positive-to-negative Cross-Tabulation of 131 articles (table 1) showed the following trends in reporting as it pertained to the Salt Lake Olympic Committee scandal:

Table 1.

Publication Positive-to-Negative Cross-Tabulation

<u>Publication name</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>Salt Lake Tribune</i>	17	32	8	57
<i>Associated Press</i>	4	20	50	74

$N = 131$

Chi square = 39.693 $p < .000$ d.f. = 2

Note. Total number of articles published and bias breakdown of each article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Associated Press Newswire* from November 25 to December 31, 1998.

A Pearson chi-square test of independence was also calculated comparing the frequency of occurrence of each value from positive-to-negative between the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Associated Press* (Chi square = 39.693 $p < .000$ d.f. = 2). An independent-samples t-test was also calculated comparing the mean scores of the *Salt Lake Tribune* and *Associated Press*, and found a significant difference between the means of the two groups: ($t(129) = -7.18, p < .000$). The mean of the *Salt Lake Tribune*: ($m = 2.68, s.d. = 1.30$) which stayed neutral-to-positive, was significantly different from the mean of the *Associated Press*: ($m = 4.24, s.d. = 1.18$) which tended to stay mostly negative. This significance clearly answers research question RQ₁ (Over a set period, will articles concerning a local business scandal from a local news source be more positive in tone than articles from a national news source?) and research question RQ₂ (Will articles published by a national news source be more negative in tone in coverage of a local business scandal than same-day stories published by a local news source?).

While the *Associated Press Newswire* was clearly more negative, the *Salt Lake Tribune* was more closely aligned with a neutral-to-positive agenda (table 1). Both research questions were answered. The *Tribune's* coverage of the issue showed a positive bias in its reporting which could possibly neutralize negative opinion against the Salt Lake Olympic Committee.

Houston Chronicle and the Wall Street Journal

The *Houston Chronicle* and *Wall Street Journal* positive-to-negative Cross-Tabulation of 477 articles (table 2) showed these trends in reporting concerning the Enron accounting scandal:

Table 2.

Publication Positive-to-Negative Cross-Tabulation

<u>Publication name</u>	<u>Positive</u>	<u>Neutral</u>	<u>Negative</u>	<u>Total</u>
<i>Houston Chronicle</i>	60	150	101	311
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	10	13	143	166

$N = 477$

Chi square = 125.622 $p < .000$ d.f. = 2

Note. Total number of articles published and bias breakdown of each article in the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Wall Street Journal* from January 1 to December 31, 2001.

As in the previous study a Pearson chi-square test of independence was also calculated comparing the frequency of occurrence of each value from positive-to-negative between

the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Wall Street Journal* (Chi square = 125.622 $p < .000$ d.f. = 2). An independent-samples t-test was calculated comparing the mean scores of the *Houston Chronicle* and the *Wall Street Journal*, and found a significant difference between the means of the two groups: $t(475) = 10.678, p < .000$. The mean of the *Houston Chronicle*: ($m = 3.26, s.d. = 1.42$) which stayed close to neutral, was significantly different from the mean of the *Wall Street Journal*: ($m = 4.60, s.d. = 1.06$) which tended to stay mostly negative. As in the *Salt Lake Tribune* study, this significance clearly supports both research questions.

While the *Wall Street Journal* reporting was clearly more negative, the *Houston Chronicle* reporting aligned closely with a neutral agenda (table 2). In this second study, as in the first, the newspaper's positive bias coverage of an issue may have affected local opinion concerning the Enron accounting scandal.

Data from both studies show a definite trend by hometown newspapers to report differently from national media. To look at trends in more detail, the Enron scandal reporting was broken out by month and each newspaper source was compared.

Data show neutral-to-positive trends in the *Houston Chronicle* (figure 2) on their coverage of Enron during this period as compared to the *Wall Street Journal* (figure 1).

Figure 1. Comparison of the different biases of news or feature coverage in the *Wall Street Journal* on the Enron Corp. from January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2001.

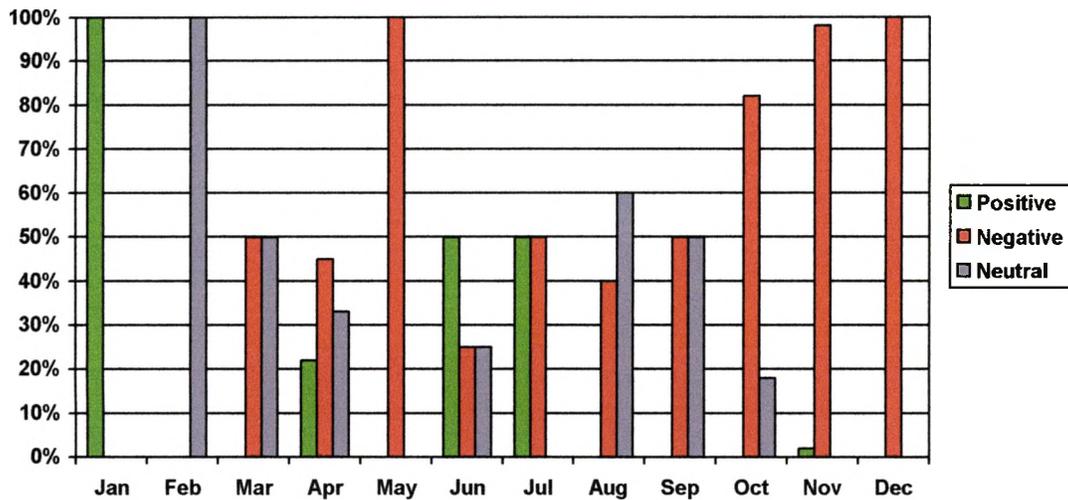


Figure 2. Comparison of the different biases of news or feature coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* on the Enron Corp. from January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2001.

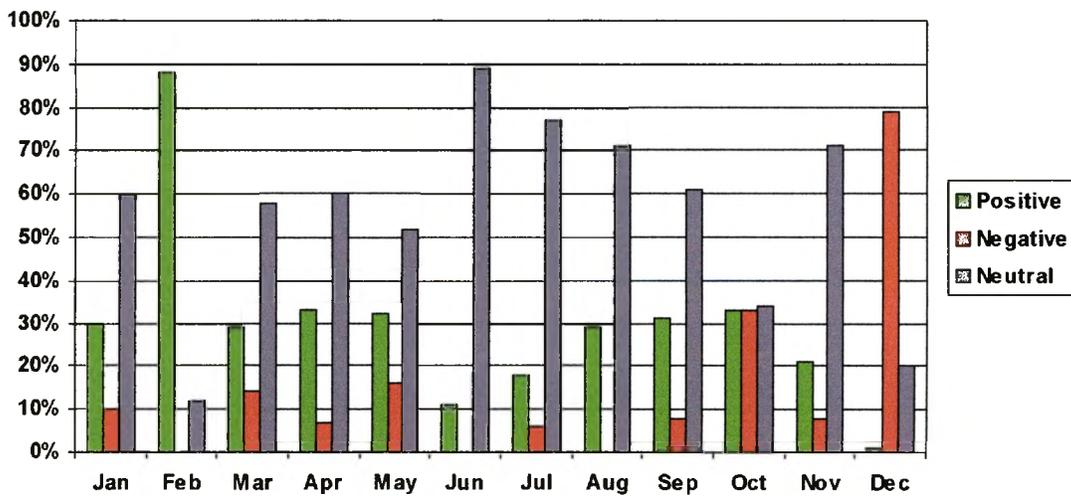


Figure 3, a side-by-side comparison of positive coverage in both newspapers, shows a general positive trend in the early part of the year, at least until the departure of Enron CEO Jeffrey Skilling, when almost no positive coverage emanated from the *Journal*. However, the *Chronicle* maintained a sizeable amount of positive coverage (around 30 percent) until December, when Enron was collapsing in scandal.

Figure 3. Comparison of the positive biases of news or feature coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* versus the *Wall Street Journal* on the Enron Corp. from January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2001.

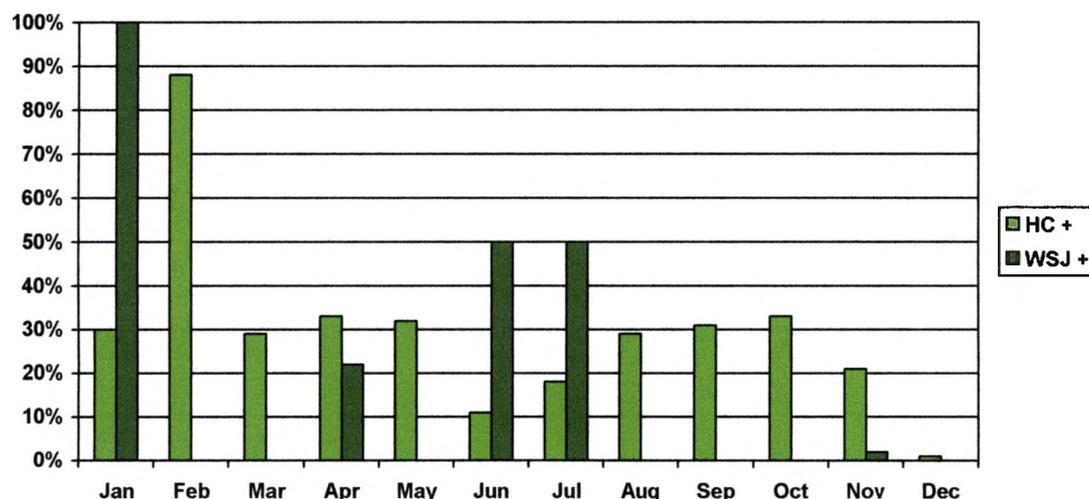


Figure 4 (comparison of negative coverage) is even more remarkable, with the *Journal* showing generally balanced positive-to-negative coverage until October when negative coverage reached 80 percent and beyond through December. September was dominated by coverage of events related to the September 11 terror attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and relatively little news space was devoted to Enron's unfolding scandal by either paper. The *Chronicle* showed relatively little negative coverage until December when Enron's collapse and financial dealings were fully disclosed by national media such as the *Journal*. In a front-page story in the *Chronicle* on

November 9, concerning Enron's announcement that it overstated income by more than \$600 million dollars over four years, the lead started out by saying, "Ever have to fix an error in your checkbook when you get your monthly bank statement in the mail? Imagine the headache Enron Corp. is facing" (Fowler, 2001). This story was indicative of the coverage by the *Chronicle* of Enron until December.

Figure 4. Comparison of the negative biases of news or feature coverage in the *Houston Chronicle* versus the *Wall Street Journal* on the Enron Corp. from January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2001.

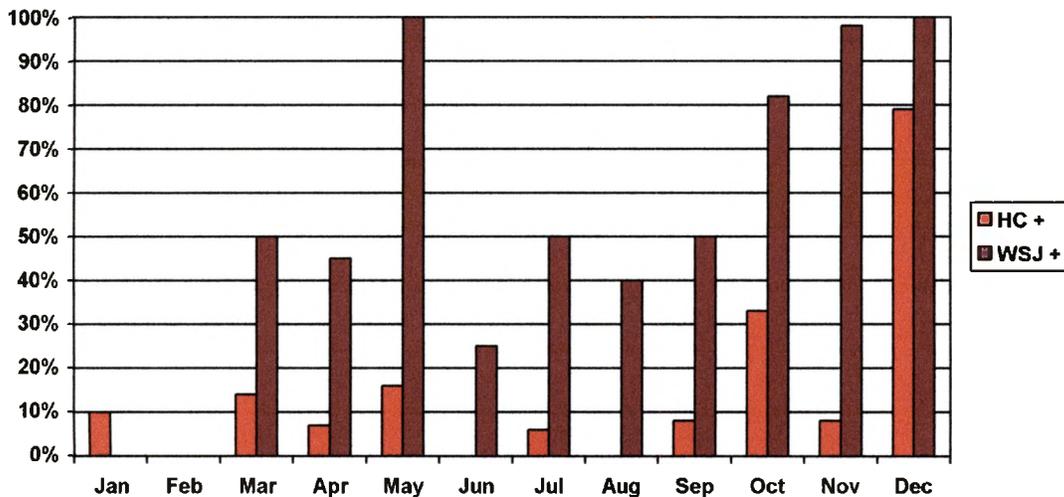
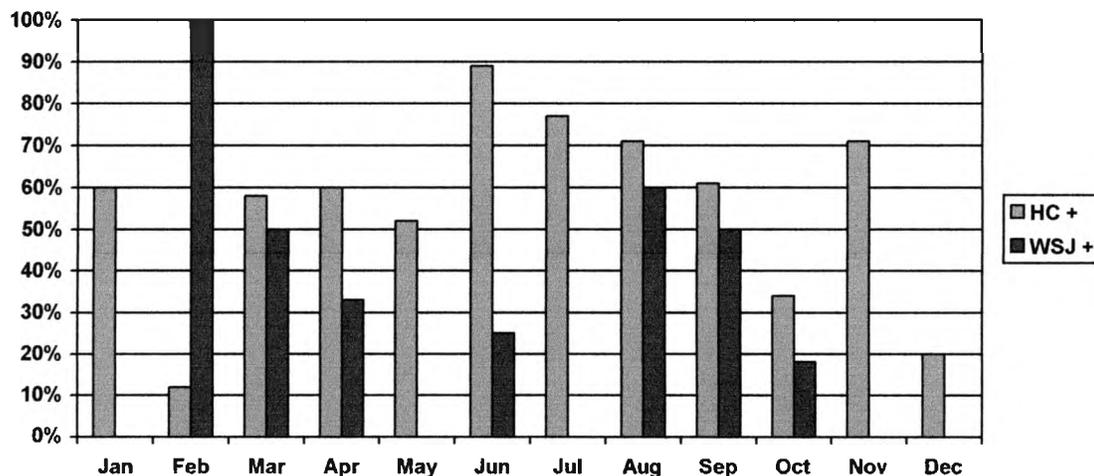


Figure 5 (comparison of neutral coverage) shows the most indicative data as to the *Chronicle's* coverage of Enron during the study's focus. Neutrality was a trademark of the *Chronicle* throughout the crisis. While the *Chronicle* had 21 stories and the *Journal* had 17 in October, all but three of the *Journal's* articles were negative on Enron. The *Chronicle* had only seven negative articles as opposed to seven positive articles and seven neutral articles. October was the month in which the *Journal* was disclosing Enron's offshore financial accounts, executive stock sales, and other significant discretions. At the same time the *Chronicle* published several positive stories on Enron's

philanthropic work in Houston, business deals to sell off an electric utility in Oregon, and CEO Ken Lay's induction into the Texas Business Hall of Fame, and on Enron's losses the headline read, "Enron posted loss after write-downs; Core businesses considered solid" (Goldberg, 2001). There were only two stories dealing with Enron's offshore financial dealings and its stock price drop in the stock market.

In November, the *Chronicle* was even more circumspect in its coverage of Enron. Out of 52 articles, only four were negative, whereas 11 were positive and 37 were neutral. The *Journal* published 56 articles on Enron, 55 of which were negative, and one was positive.

Figure 5. Comparison of the neutral biases of news or feature coverage in the Houston Chronicle versus the Wall Street Journal on the Enron Corp. from January 1, 2001 through December 31, 2001.



CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this study I attempted to explore some of the questions concerning the relationship between business and the media. Specifically, I have examined whether local business influence on hometown media might affect a newspaper's ability to portray business news events subjectively and whether there was a difference in positive or negative news coverage between local and national media.

In both studies there are clear indications of bias and the unbalanced framing of an issue when compared with the way national media reported the event. While there is no indication or documentation that either paper was influenced by outside sources to “go easy” on each corporate entity, data show that both papers may have shown bias and downplayed negative news on the issues, especially in the early stages of each scandal, possibly because of the corporate entity's hometown connections. While national news sources were engaged in overall negative reporting of the details of each of the scandals covered, both of the local newspapers studied were neutral-to-positive in their coverage. Moreover, while neither paper seemed to be an overt cheerleader for either company, they did stay neutral while national media had a negative bias in the coverage of each company. Whether reporters and editors at the *Tribune* or the *Chronicle* were positively biased toward the Salt Lake Olympic Committee or Enron, data show that there was a trend in reporting not critical of each entity's predicament.

In the case of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, this may have been a response by the paper to help keep the reputation and prestige of the future Salt Lake City Olympic Games intact. The Salt Lake Olympic Committee had been operating in Salt Lake City for many years and had a major presence in the city, spending millions of dollars in preparation for the future games.

If the *Salt Lake Tribune* had made every effort to pursue its coverage of one of the most noted bribery scandal stories of the decade, especially since the story was local, it may have been in the enviable position of breaking some of the biggest stories of the year.

As for the *Houston Chronicle* and Enron, this study shows clear indications of hometown bias by the *Chronicle* in its treatment of the Enron Corp. As in the case of the *Salt Lake Tribune*, there is no indication or documentation that the *Chronicle* was influenced by outside sources to take it easy on Enron. However, the newspaper did show bias toward and may have ignored negative news on Enron during its collapse and subsequent bankruptcy because the company was Houston based. While other news sources were engaged in “rooting out” the details of Enron’s bookkeeping, the *Chronicle* seemed to be “rooting for” the home team. The *Chronicle* stayed neutral while national media had a definite negative bias in their coverage of the company. It wasn’t until December, when Enron was bankrupt and thousands of Houstonians were out of work, that the *Chronicle* began definitive negative coverage of Enron.

In a conversation with *Houston Chronicle* Business and Technology writer Tom Fowler on March 23, 2002, he stated that there was a lot of criticism by other media of the paper’s press coverage of Enron. In retrospect, he felt the *Chronicle* could have done

much better in its coverage of the company's dealings but that nobody ignored anything at Enron. "Everyone smelled something bad but didn't want to call it," Fowler said. Fowler also said it was a bad decision by the newspaper not to put more reporters on the story when CEO Jeffrey Skilling left in August. He stated the *Chronicle's* biggest failure was not seeing anything significant in Enron's financial dealings and not having enough reporters cover the story when it broke. Whether reporters and editors at the *Houston Chronicle* were overtly biased toward Enron, data show that there was a definite trend in positive reporting of the company's predicament.

Both news coverage studies point toward a possible trend by local media to go softer on their hometown business partners. Whether it is a conscious or unconscious effort by reporters and editors to moderate the bad news from business stories remains undetermined, however, the bias is present.

Weaknesses

This study has some inherent weaknesses. It may not be truly representative of how hometown media throughout the United States report on local business issues since the study concentrated on newspaper reporting of events in only two locations and in one-newspaper towns. The possible lack of competition in a one-newspaper town may also have deterred the newspaper from pursuing the story as aggressively as papers with local competition. It could also be argued that, by ignoring broadcast media in the study, generalizing these findings to all media may not be accurate.

However, while the narrowness of the study may prevent generalization, it can be argued that newspaper coverage of the events was more in-depth and gave readers a more

detailed picture of the complexity of each issue than broadcast media. Therefore, the bias shown by each local news source may have been more pervasive.

Recommendations

More directed research needs to be conducted to determine how local business news bias is created in the newsroom. A study concentrating on the creators of the news through the use of surveys and direct observation might give insights into this process.

Broadcast media, magazines, and Internet news sites should also be included in future studies to confirm or discount their possible bias on local business issues.

It may also be interesting to see if local business bias in news reporting can fall into a predictable pattern that can be generalized throughout the industry.

In future studies, surveys of public opinion before, during and after a business news event may help determine whether there was influence by local media in the way they framed the issue. As an example, a local opinion poll was conducted in Salt Lake City by local media to determine support for the Olympic Committee (“Olympics Falling,” 1998). Taken before and after the bribery scandal broke in 1998, Salt Lake City residents were asked if they supported the Salt Lake Olympic Committee and its bid for the 2002 Olympic Games (“Olympics Falling”). Before the scandal broke the percentage of residents supporting the Salt Lake Olympic Committee was hovering around 67 percent (5 percent margin of error). After the scandal broke the percentage of residents supporting the Salt Lake Olympic Committee was 64 percent (5 percent margin of error). Another question was asked of respondents after the scandal was publicized as to whether they were still confident in the leadership of the Salt Lake Olympic Committee, with 62

percent (5 percent margin of error) stating that they were confident (“Olympics Falling,” 1998). Data from the poll suggests that there may be some influence or agenda setting effect with the neutral news coverage by the *Salt Lake Tribune*. This may be an interesting direction for future research.

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VITA

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