

COMMUNITY STRUCTURE, THE MEDIA AND  
CHILD MOLESTATION NEWS STORIES:  
WHAT HAPPENS TO OBJECTIVITY  
WHEN IT GOES TO TRIAL?

by

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## ABSTRACT

This study evaluated the effects of structural pluralism on the objective reporting of newspapers when covering cases of child molestation by teachers. Eight newspapers were selected covering four different molestation cases. A content analysis was conducted to analyze the usage of frames, hard or soft news, and the objective balance of assertions. Statistical analysis showed no difference in objective sourcing between the newspapers in the low pluralistic community and the high pluralistic community. Also, the newspapers showed little difference in the use of conflict frames, consent frames and story type (hard or soft news). While the results cannot be generalized beyond the sample used, the results do suggest some ramifications for structural pluralism research in the future, and also suggest it may be important to study the ability of small newspapers to mimic larger papers in the Internet age.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

While many journalism school students dream lofty dreams of working for the New York Times or the Washington Post, it is much more likely that journalism school graduates will work for a newspaper that is oriented toward a smaller, specialized geographic community. In reality, 97 percent of newspapers in the United States are weeklies or dailies with a local focus (Lauterer, 2006). According to the Pew Research Center, 4 percent of people said they read the New York Times online, 2 percent cited reading the Wall Street Journal, Washington Post and USA Today websites, but 7 percent said they went to a local newspaper website for news (Pew Research Center, 2009). In 2010 the Pew Research Center reported that 21 percent of respondents are reading print-only news, and an additional 5 percent are reading their news in a combination of traditional print newspapers and online sources. People may continue reading print news for a wide variety of reasons – to get local news, local arrest reports, local land sales, or maybe just to subscribe for the local coupons. But for whatever reason, Americans tend to read their community news.

Community journalism may incorporate ideas similar to those from the public journalism movement into its reporting and editorial decisions. For example, when a newspaper considers community needs more so than traditional news values and creates a discussion within the community, the newspaper provides a public journalism service. Newspapers can take issues that are of concern to their community and report on those issues, allow the citizens to discuss

the ideas and open dialogue with the people who can make changes. Moving from community-wide discussion to actual change is more likely and practical in a smaller community than in a larger community.

The theory of structural pluralism may help explain the effects that differences in size and complexity of communities have on media. If a community is more “pluralistic,” there will be a more complex power structure (and the community is typically larger), and the local newspaper will need to consider more perspectives in its reporting. However, in a town with fewer people and is less pluralistic, there may be a simplistic power structure and fewer viewpoints on an issue. It can be inferred that there is less structural pressure on the publication to present material in an objective, balanced and detached manner. Therefore, the local newspaper may be more able to shape content so that it relates directly to more of its readers, in this less-complex, less-fragmented community.

Objectivity, an ethic of the 1900s, has been widely debated in recent years. Many scholars do not believe it to be an achievable or realistic goal, and think that it should be abolished from newsroom vernacular. But staunch supporters believe that without it, news reporting would become a mess of personal opinions leaking into coverage. Some historians trace its origins to the days of newspaper mergers in the early 1900s when newspapers suddenly had more readers to satisfy and their political agendas had to give way to the needs of a more diverse readership (Streckfuss, 1990). With that as one of its primary purposes, one could say that the degree to which media are specialized lessens the pressure for objectivity. If a community is less fragmented by competing groups, then the community will tend to have less diversity of viewpoints, which decreases the pressure on editors to pursue objectivity (as defined by “balance”).

This research focuses on how community newspapers react when facing a local crisis, and to what degree they show attempts to be objective in this coverage. The crisis chosen is the incident of shame in a community – particularly, public cases of child molestation by local teachers. When child molestation accusations are aimed at administrators within the power structure of a community, how do the community and the community’s newspaper react? Based on the theory of structural pluralism, the degree of pluralism in a community will shape how balanced the coverage is. It is less likely that media in a less pluralistic community will incorporate a wide diversity of viewpoints. They would be more likely to include information that is derived from the community’s more cohesive, less diverse, power base. The result will be a media that promotes cohesiveness at the expense of balanced, wide-ranging coverage –what journalists typically call “objectivity.” In contrast, it is more likely that media in a more pluralistic community will incorporate more viewpoints and therefore pursue more widely balanced coverage. If the community size allows the media to be less balanced, the outcome would be to take a side and either defend the accused to the very end, or criminalize them even more because the accusations threaten the existence of peace in the town. By looking at the objectivity presented through balance of sourcing, the research will determine if the level of objectivity is different in the newspaper of less diverse community than it is in the more diverse nearby city. In addition, the research will look at other ways that the newspapers reported the cases, including the conflict and consensus frames used in stories and the use of hard news reporting versus soft news stories. The research will focus on four cases that occurred in various regions of the United States, analyzing news coverage of child molestation cases in the local community newspaper and in a nearby urban newspaper.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Objectivity and its history**

The concept of objectivity has been evident in different forms since the beginning of American journalism. Scholars consider one of the earliest forms to be “neutrality” dating back to the colonial period. At that time, a printer ran a newspaper as part of his business and didn’t care what sentiments were printed as long as an author could pay for space in the paper (Sloan, 2005). The American Revolution put an end to objectivity in this form. As tensions grew between England and the colonies, any printer who was viewed as a British sympathizer was harassed until he or she was run out of business or out of town (Williams, 2005). Following the revolution, newspapers continued printing highly partisan papers, often with the financial support of a political figure – e.g., Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson (Sheppard, 2008; Humphrey, 2005). The party press gave way to the penny press, and journalism became a method of giving the people information they needed to make decisions in an increasingly complex society. Such journalism included information on all sides of the political spectrum, in addition to other areas of modern life (Dicken-Garcia, 2005; Schudson, 1990). In addition, this era was spurred by the effort of newspapers to reach an increasingly literate urban class with a cheap newspaper and gain more advertising revenue through a greatly increased circulation rate. With more readers, newspapers found it more profitable to remain neutral in reporting events so that they wouldn’t alienate a portion of their readers. Today, it is still argued that objectivity aids

newspapers in reaching a large group of readers and increasing the economic prosperity of the business.

The term “objectivity” was used by journalists beginning in the early 1900s. As journalism became a more cohesive profession, budding professional organizations began to create codes and guidelines, including the standards of objectivity. While critics say it is impossible to completely eliminate personal background and bias from news reporting (Patnode, Shaw, & Knowlton, 2005), objectivity has remained an ideal of the profession taught by journalism educators and encouraged by the professional associations. The 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries have seen many complex issues in journalism, which have led to more divisive feelings on the issue of objectivity. Some historians think that the muckrakers of the late 1800s and early 1900s were great examples of journalists using objectivity because they allowed the facts to speak for themselves after doing extensive research on the topic. By letting the facts speak, those historians say that the muckrakers were objective, even though the facts they presented were critical of the institutions they attacked. (Patnode, Shaw, & Knowlton, 2005). However, others believe that readers are not capable of, or will not take the time to sort through raw facts and determining what is important without the assistance and guidance of the journalist. These scholars suggest that journalists should think based on facts, but not give the facts complete power and therefore include some analysis based on facts (Patnode, Shaw, & Knowlton, 2005).

The strength of “objectivity” as a concept seems to have been diluted over decades of use. Streckfuss (1990) found that the term was originally used in the early days of the scientific method, when social scientists were eager to adopt the methodology for their own use, and was then converted from the social sciences to journalism. Several predominant cultural attitudes at the time spurred the development of objective journalism. The first was that the work of several

psychologists had indicated that humans naturally make assumptions without gathering facts upon which to base their judgments. People began to realize that if they did not use facts to make judgments or did not have a trustworthy source of their facts, then they could not make informed political decisions (Streckfuss, 1990).

Another reason for original objectivity was the increase in the early 1900s of newspaper mergers. In 1920, about 45 percent of cities had multiple newspapers serving their community, but by 1930, only 28.5 percent of cities had multiple newspapers. Newspaper mergers contributed to this decline. During these mergers, several newspapers that had distinct political leanings were combined into one newspaper that had to provide a more middle-of-the-road approach to their reporting because they were serving more diverse audiences. That approach came in the form of “objective” reporting (Streckfuss, 1990).

### **Contemporary Discussion of Objectivity**

The possibility and practice of objectivity is strongly debated among practitioners of journalism and educators. For example, Ryan (2001), echoing a common viewpoint, says journalists should try to observe the world and transmit that view to the public without interjecting personal opinion. He points out that journalistic objectivity was born out of an attempt to legitimize journalism as a profession by mimicking the objective standards of scientific objectivity, which include: collecting information with accuracy, completeness, precision and clarity; being open to new evidence and alternative explanations; not catering to power structures; and being honest about personal biases and preferences (Ryan, 2001). Ryan suggests journalists can achieve objectivity and use their own analytical and interpretive skills to give meaning to the information. Many scholars believe the two are mutually exclusive - a journalist can either be objective, or can interpret facts. Ryan, a scholar of public journalism,

rejects that idea, believing the two must mix.

Boyer (1981) reflected standards of objectivity common in the 1970s and early 1980s by saying that a journalist must give all or at least multiple sides of the story, should not editorialize, and must attribute quotes so that readers know who gave what information. Boyer found in his survey of newspaper editors that most, regardless of their level of professional training, defined objectivity in terms of balance, fairness and service to readers. Likewise, Dennis (1984) described three characteristics of the process of objectivity: separating fact from opinion, being emotionally detached in presentation of material, and striving for fairness and balance, giving all sides full attention. Dennis says “objectivity in journalism or science does not mean that all decisions do not have underlying values, only that within the ‘rules of the game’ a systematic attempt is made to achieve an impartial report.” (1984, p. 118). He advocated for considering certain aspects of the story carefully in order to obtain an objective perspective. Many journalists have taken these methods to heart by using certain interviewing techniques, gathering certain information in certain ways and presenting the information in a predetermined format. The five aspects Dennis said the journalist must consider are most clearly put forth in the writing of Ronald Buel. Journalists must ask: what is worth covering and why, when has enough information been gathered, what is important enough to be put into a story, what words and images will be used, and what story is important enough for top-billing and which stories can be buried (Buel, cited in Dennis, 1984, p. 114-116). Were journalists to consider these questions during their writing process, Dennis said, journalists would have an objective article because they followed a set of rules designed to foster objectivity. Critics of this form of objective journalism say it leads to presenting an “official truth” and only helps to re-establish the powerful status quo – a criticism that dovetails with implications of the community power

structure framework.

Rosen argued against a traditional objectivity because people absorb news constantly through 24-hour news networks, radio stations, and now, online news. They don't need simple statements of the issues. Rosen (1993) said that the only way that print journalism can stay afloat is by offering additional value, such as interpretation and context of events. He wrote that objectivity is no longer useful because reporters should not be passive observers of news; rather, they need to offer useful analysis of events.

Brent Cunningham (2003) pointed to the press' dependence on objectivity, which makes the press "passive recipients of news, rather than aggressive analyzers and explainers of it" (2003, p. 26). He said that objectivity can prevent the search for truth by allowing lazy reporting that does not push past raw facts (2003). Objectivity also relies heavily on sourcing from government officials, which promotes the status quo, rather than challenging officials, and ends in giving only the "official" truth. Finally, Cunningham said that objectivity keeps the press from being able to set the public agenda, so they have no choice but to follow the agenda presented by government.

## **Public Journalism**

Recent discussions of the role of objectivity in today's journalism coalesce with discussions about "public journalism." The public journalism movement, of which Rosen is one of the founders, incorporates arguments about where the press should be going, normatively, and the practices that will help it get where it needs to go – and so essentially it has been a movement to reform the press (Rosen, 1995, p. v).

Critics of public journalism say that it is dangerous to ethics, but a survey by Arant and Meyer (1998) showed that public journalists were just as sensitive to ethics as traditional

journalists; Meyer (1994) says traditional journalism emphasizes the values of objectivity in the forms of fairness, balance, and detachment. Arant and Meyer surveyed 1,000 newspaper staff members and asked about their views on the values of public journalism and traditional journalism. They found that most traditional journalists think that helping their community is important, but that they should not cross into activism. Almost all of the journalists, public and traditional alike, said that the traditional goals of activism were important to their daily practice of journalism: serving as a watchdog of government, exposing government wrongdoing, and giving the public the information they need for daily life. The authors suggested that the reason they found little difference in attitudes was because public journalism isn't a change in how journalism is done, but a reminder to journalists that their goal is to help society (Merritt, 1997, cited in Avant & Meyer, 1998).

One concern that Corrigan (1999) voices is that if journalism becomes part of the public process, it loses its ability to act independently. If journalists abandon objectivity, as public journalism suggests, everything becomes relative. Corrigan says that in order for public journalism to work, "the ideal [of objectivity] is lost to the need to act for the common good" (1999, p. 166).

### **Community Journalism**

The term "community journalism" is distinct from "public journalism," as it tends to relate particularly to journalism that serves small, cohesive communities. The term "community journalism" can be traced back to editor-publisher Kenneth Byerly while he was teaching at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Byerly (1961) felt that "country weekly" was no longer an applicable term encompassing all newspapers that weren't in the major daily category, and even "small town" was not suitable for those that published in suburban areas.

Byerly's 1961 textbook, *Community Journalism*, from which the term gained popularity, listed nine roles that community newspapers play, based on responses of readers in a town after their newspaper ceased publication. Those nine roles detailed the press' responsibility to report local news that readers cannot get from other publications, advocate local projects, encourage citizens to think about local concerns, and to unify the community.

In a chapter on how community newspaper editors should handle news concerning courts and crime, Byerly (1961) pointed out that most editors of community newspapers do not agree on the best way to handle cases concerning local citizens. Based on responses from editors when asked about a hypothetical situation, Byerly determined that most editors agree they should report on most activities of crime and the courts. However, how editors handled stories of crime in their newspapers differed.

In the face of declining media credibility, news organizations are striving to reconnect with their communities (Anderson, Dardenne & Killenberg, 1994). To do so, they must first define their community. The United States is composed of many types of communities, based on geography, interests, loose associations, and identity. Anderson, Dardenne and Killenberg suggest newspapers can connect to community by creating a conversational form of journalism. News organizations can accomplish this, they say, by "demand[ing] that people in communities do more than consume news; they [news organizations] must motivate listening, stimulate thinking, and provide opportunities for citizens to sound off" (1994, p. 106). They say journalists should be asking what the people think, what they dream, and listen intently to bring about change for the community.

Literature on community journalism has traditionally emphasized the closeness between journalists and their audiences in small communities. Journalists are part of the community they

cover in these small locales, and this literature suggests the power structure tends to be “flat,” so that prestige is “democratized – a wide diversity of people appear in the news media in a small community, for example. Early research on community journalism says that news media in a community can create a more homogenous community (Park, 1923) by bridging the gap between different social power levels and helping to extend personal and social contacts (Janowitz, 1967). Community journalism is seen as being accessible to a community, held accountable by the community, and the most prevalent type of media in smaller markets (Lowrey, Brozana, and McKay, 2008).

Varied descriptions of community journalism can be found within the profession and among those who claim to practice it. Based on an analysis of studies focusing on community journalism, Lowrey, Brozana and Mackay (2008) described community journalism as “intimate, caring, and personal; it reflects the community and tells its stories; and it embraces a leadership role” (p. 276). They found that a dominant description of the function of community journalism is that it should “tell a community about itself and engage in a search for meaning and sense making” (p. 293). In a finding that relates to the current study, they say community journalism should also strive to balance the pluralism of the community with the need to encourage a cohesiveness among the many facets of their community.

However, in his discussion on community journalism, Barney (1996) warns against journalists adopting a totally communitarian concept for news. He argues that when journalists become so concerned about the community good, they may lose the ability to think and act for themselves outside the structure of the community. On the other hand, if newspapers advocate an individualist approach, citizens are likely to incorporate the greater good of the community into their decisions as individualists. While Barney advocates the individualistic perspective

rather than community journalism, he notes in the end that societies have little faith in the idea that individuals will make decisions with the community good in mind, so newspapers will still tend toward communitarianism to seek the good of their society.

### **Structural Pluralism**

The literature on community and objectivity suggests that the concept of a community's pluralism and diversity is important to the concept of community journalism – and to journalism's relative ability to benefit community. In particular, some scholars hold that the structure of power in a community and the degree to which power sources are “pluralistic” in a community shape how people in a community make sense of their world (Dunwoody & Griffin, 1999). The “structural pluralism” of a community refers to “the degree of differentiation in the social system along institutional and specialized interest group lines, in a way that determines the potential sources of organized social power” (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1980, p. 16). Communities that are more pluralistic usually have larger populations and more diverse power structures (powerful government or commercial entities). Less pluralistic communities tend to have smaller populations and fewer sources competing for power.

Tichenor, Olien and Donohue examined how the structure of society affects the decisions that journalists make. They differentiate between communities based on their structural pluralism. There are several ways that scholars have determined structural pluralism for research purposes. In their 1980 study, Tichenor, Donohue and Olien list five measurable characteristics of structural pluralism (though later studies varied this list): “(1) population of the municipality, (2) number of businesses in the community, (3) number of voluntary groups, (4) number of churches, (5) number of schools and educational centers” (p. 40). They simply counted items 2-5 from the local phone books. Another possible set of characteristics used to determine pluralism

is: “city population, county population, county per-capita income, labor force not in agriculture and distance from a major metropolitan area” (McCluskey, Stein, Boyle & McLeod, 2009, p. 359; Tichenor, et al., 1980). All of the elements for the alternative set of data can be determined from U.S. Census Bureau data.

Levels of structural pluralism can affect media coverage. While scholars acknowledge that many factors can form or alter how media operate in a place, they believe that the structure of power in a place is a good indicator of how media will view their role in society (Demers & Viswanath, 1999). Mass media often are viewed as reinforcers of the status quo of power in a town; however, they also can provide a much stronger voice for change in a community than other social institutions, such as churches, schools or individual family units (Demers & Viswanath, 1999). Several studies have shown that in less pluralistic societies, the news media assume the role of “legitimizers of projects, builders of consensus and instruments for tension management” (Dunwoody & Griffin, 1999, p. 143; Olien, Donohue & Tichenor 1968). In more pluralistic societies, journalists must be “communication brokers” because so many sources of information emerge from many power sources in the community. When many groups compete for power, there is no single group or “oligarchy” on which local media are dependent, and this conflict among groups opens up space for the local media to have some degree of autonomy. In these situations the news outlets can break through the controlled status quo and give citizens the information they need to make informed decisions (Dunwoody & Griffin, 1999). Media in more pluralistic communities also help multiple powerful institutions in a community communicate with one another. Also, in more pluralistic societies, newspapers are more likely to cover social conflict and groups that challenge the power structure (Demers & Viswanath, 1999).

## **Conflict Framing**

The concept of framing is strongly related to notions of objectivity and bias in the news, and it is likely that the framing of news stories in more pluralistic communities will differ from stories in less pluralistic communities – particularly as it relates to the way conflict and consensus are portrayed.

Framing, as a mass communication theory, suggests news stories can be told in a way that will tell the audience how it should interpret an event or story. Journalists do this through the choice of images and words that cause viewers to see the topic in a certain way. Framing can be subtle. A framed news story will not blatantly attempt to persuade a reader to interpret a story a certain way, but it will use symbols and frames of reference that are meant to bring certain association to the mind of the reader, causing them to interpret the story within that frame (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009). Through the analysis of frames, researchers can see the ways that communication, such as speeches, news reports, or novels, influences the thinking of a person (Entman, 1993). Research has shown that journalists may adopt a frame based on societal norms, pressure from their organization, pressure from special interest groups, their own professional routines, or their personal ideologies or politics (Tewksbury & Scheufele, 2009; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996; Tuchman, 1978). It is logical to expect that degree of structural pluralism of a community and other institutions in a community could be pressures as well. Some examples of common frames are human interest frames, conflict vs. consensus frames, or economic consequences frames.

Framing can result from journalists making issues more salient. Salience means to make “a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Frames can diagnose a problem in society, evaluate that problem, and prescribe a

solution. A news story can make an issue more salient by placing it in certain places, through repetition, or by using culturally accepted symbols as representations of the issue in the story. In addition to what frames draw attention to, framing is equally about what frames are able to draw attention away from, particularly through the omission of important information (Entman, 1993). However, frames are not effective simply from their existence. Readers must interpret the framed issue in the manner expected in order for a frame to be effective (Entman, 1989; Entman, 1993; Graber, 1988).

Entman (1993) suggested journalists could obtain greater levels of objectivity by fully understanding framing. Even if journalists follow the rules for objectivity, they can end up with a decidedly slanted article if they incorporated a frame unintentionally. If a frame is included, the audience may not be able to make a balanced judgment of the issue. However, journalists who are properly schooled in framing can create stories that make the different perspectives equally salient. Doing this would require journalists to take a more “active and sophisticated role” (1993, p. 57) than before, but it would result in more balanced reporting than relying solely on the reporting formula most journalists currently use for obtaining objectivity (Entman, 1993; Tuchman, 1978).

One common type of frame – the conflict frame – focuses on conflict between individuals, groups, or institutions (Kim, 2007; Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992). Reese and Buckalew (1995) define the conflict frame as one that emphasizes conflict, dramatic visuals, action, and balanced coverage. However, critics disagree as to the usefulness of such a frame for readers. While it may lead to more varied points of view, it can also reduce issues to very simplistic two-sided arguments (Bennett, 2003). In a study of coverage of the U.S. immigration debate, Kim (2007) found that the conflict frame was the most frequently used frame in the news coverage. Kim

suggested the conflict frame is the most-used frame because it presents a wider difference between two perspectives than a typical “horse race” frame, which is based on the candidate’s position in polls. The debate over immigration may also be positioned better for conflict framing because of the inherent and binary “us” vs. “them” nature of the issue. Community issues may also take on conflict frames – the community power structure framework would seem to suggest that more pluralistic communities with multiple power sources would be more conflict-oriented than small, more homogenous communities, which may lack diversity of viewpoints.

A consensus frame, as defined by Reese and Buckalew (1995), comes out of the media’s need to be seen as an involved member of the community. Consensus frames emphasize the good of the community. Generally, news organizations in less pluralistic societies want to maintain a sense of consensus through their coverage, because the community does not have a way to deal with conflict; therefore, in less complex communities, it is more likely that the consensus frame will be used more frequently in news accounts than will the conflict frame (McCluskey, et al., 2009). The ways that a community deals with conflict can also affect the problem/solution nature of framing. Griffin, Dunwoody, and Gehrman (1995) found that more pluralistic newspapers would frame stories about environment contaminants as a problem in need of a solution, while less pluralistic newspapers would frame the situation as a problem being solved.

### **Child Molestation**

The issue of child molestation – the topic addressed in this study -- lends itself well to an analysis of objectivity and framing in community news because it is a socially charged issue. When a member of a community is accused of this crime, especially a member of the community power structure, such as a teacher, the news coverage is likely fueled by community opinion. That opinion could be that the power structure must be protected, and therefore, the person could

never have committed that crime, or the prevailing opinion may be that the morals of the community are in jeopardy and the accused person is demonized by the community and the media.

There are few studies on sexual abuse in schools. Some of the reasons for this include: so few cases of abuse being reported, school districts' reluctance to offer their information to researchers, desire to protect the privacy of those involved and the negative publicity it would bring to their area (Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995). Most of the literature accessible on instances of abuse comes from newspapers, where one can see the community reaction to the event and the way the school is handling it, but news stories are no substitute for comprehensive research.

Shakeshaft and Cohan (1995) began their four-year study by trying to create definitions and distinctions concerning sexual abuse. They determined that common definitions involving unwelcome behavior that is sexual in nature were insufficient because they were relying on adult-to-adult experiences. They are quick to point out that sexual contact between an adult and a minor, whether it is perceived as welcome or not, is a criminal act. They separated behaviors into four categories. Two were noncontact behaviors and two were contact behaviors. The first noncontact level was of a visual nature. This level involves an adult showing pornography to a child, exposing himself or herself to the child, or making suggestive hand gestures. The second level of noncontact behavior was verbal. This behavior included making sexual comments, jeering, taunting or asking inappropriate questions about sexual activity. Then, the first level of contact behavior included fondling, touching students outside their clothing, touching them on the breasts, or buttocks, or sexual hugging and kissing. Finally, the second level of contact sexual abuse involved "genital touching, vaginal or anal insertion, and oral/genital contact" (Shakeshaft & Cohan, 1995, paragraph 12).

Two studies of sexual harassment found that a large number of students reported that they had been sexually harassed by a faculty or staff member during their years in school. The American Association of University Women (1993) reported 25 percent for females and 10 percent for males in grades 8 through 11, while an earlier study of high school graduates in North Carolina (Wishnietsky, 1991) reported the number of students with a complaint about advances from a teacher at 82.2 percent of females and 17.7 percent of males. Shakeshaft and Cohan (1995) found that reports of sexual abuse of both types occurred at all grade levels, but that the superintendents they interviewed were more likely to report cases of contact sexual abuse than noncontact abuse.

The reactions to the allegations in many cases were surprising to researchers. The majority of victims reported are female; however, in Shakeshaft and Cohan's (1995) article, superintendents seemed to take abuse of males more seriously. The researchers found that those cases were more readily accessible in their minds, they knew more details about them, and they pursued their investigations more thoroughly. The researchers reported that males who report sexual abuse are rarely suspected of lying or complicity, which is not true of female accusers. They also reported that cases of homosexual abuse were seen as more serious offenses than heterosexual cases of abuse.

In addition, they reported that the community response tended to rally support around the teacher, not the accuser. Teachers also supported the teacher accused, rather than the accuser. These groups saw administrations as victimizing the teacher, or "out-to-get" a good teacher. Superintendents reported that they felt torn in their reactions, because many had good friendships with the teacher accused, or felt they needed to protect the teacher in case the accusation were false, but they also felt they needed to support the child who may have been the victim of sexual

abuse by a teacher in their district. As one principal remarked, “The reality is you failed to protect your kids...there’s still that feeling of, ‘what could I have done differently?’” (Hendrie, 1998).

In a more recent article on how new technology has affected instances of child molestation by school staff, Maxwell and Holovach (2007) found that technology such as text messaging and social networking sites made it easier for staff members to arrange trysts with students. The harm to the student can even be increased by these technologies, because the perpetrator can pursue the student in and out of school. However, the helpful aspect of this technology is that it provides evidence for investigators, even when they don’t have a cooperating victim.

While there are few cases of child molestation by teachers reported in small towns, this is still a prevalent issue, and it is a good example of the type of issue that can arise in a small town, and the type of issue that the media in a small town might treat differently from media in a large town.

## **Hypotheses**

The structural pluralism approach offers a rationale for the phenomenon of journalism in small communities responding differently to issues and events than do journalism in large communities. This study focuses on the community issue of child molestation by representatives of a community’s public institutions (teachers).

According to the structural pluralism approach, more highly pluralistic communities offer more sources of power, and therefore more diverse sources of news information. Less pluralistic communities are more likely to offer fewer or even one dominant source of information for the media, and therefore less diversity of viewpoints. So, in more pluralistic communities, the

journalism is more likely to show balance, and journalists are more likely to be detached and less dependent on single sources of power. That would lead to more objective, balanced writing in the more pluralistic communities.

H1: Newspapers in communities with greater pluralism will be more objective within stories, and newspapers in less pluralistic communities will be less objective.

In more pluralistic communities, the news coverage is more likely to be able to be “hard hitting” with their stories because they are less beholden to any one single powerful source. In less pluralistic communities, the news coverage may tend to be less hard hitting, with more soft news stories, because journalists may be more sensitive to upsetting sources.

RQ1: To what degree does the pluralism of the community predict the amount of hard news or soft news the newspaper reports?

When a newspaper frames a story, it tells an audience how they should interpret an event or story based on the images and words that are used. Given that journalism in less pluralistic societies tend to be more oriented toward maintaining tranquility, it would logically follow that smaller community newspapers would use consensus frames. Conflict frames should be more prominent in more pluralistic communities because of the greater likelihood of diverse and disagreeing points of view in these communities.

H2: Newspapers in less pluralistic communities will be more likely to use consensus frames than newspapers in more pluralistic communities.

H3: Newspapers in more pluralistic communities will be more likely to use conflict frames than newspapers in less pluralistic communities.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHOD

#### **Sample**

The sample for this study consisted of news articles written about four separate child molestation trials in four separate areas of the country – each involved a schoolteacher and each took place in a small community. For each trial, all forms of coverage, including articles, letters to the editor, editorials, updates, and blogs, published about the trial in the small community’s daily paper and all coverage of the trial by the nearest major urban daily paper, were sampled. Guided by the structural pluralism approach, the sample was chosen from both small-town (less complexity) newspapers and urban newspapers (more complexity), in order to obtain comparison by level of pluralism.

To obtain the sample, the researcher conducted general Google searches, Google news searches, and Lexis-Nexis searches using the keywords “child molestation” and “teacher.” All possible cases of child molestation by teachers were then compiled and evaluated based on five criteria.

The first criterion was that the case had gone to trial. In instances where accusations had just taken place, or cases had not gone any further, there were not enough articles to evaluate. In addition, the purpose of the research, to evaluate how news coverage was handled locally and in the nearest city, was best served when a case went to trial because there was consistent coverage

of the case and more opportunity for conflict or consensus-building among the communities' citizens.

The second criterion was that the population of the smaller community in which the accusation took place be less than 50,000. This number was chosen based on Byerly (1961) and Lauterer's (2006) definitions of community journalism. The population was determined by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey estimates for 2005-2009, because 2010 data were not released at the time of sampling. However, one case was chosen from a larger town -- the town of Vista, California, which had a population estimate of 90,356 in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey. Though not ideal, this case was chosen in order to increase the study's sample size because reported cases of child molestation committed by teachers in small towns were limited. (Analyses were conducted to see if this case differed significantly from the other cases in terms of the nature of story content -- findings were not statistically different.) Also, the newspaper that covered the case appeared to focus entirely on the Vista community, and so the paper was community-oriented rather than regional in nature. In all four cases, the population of the small town is less than 10 percent the population of the nearby urban area.

The third criterion was that both the community newspaper and an urban newspaper had covered the case. This was necessary in order to test the impact of structural pluralism on the same news coverage.

Once all possible cases had been chosen, Google searches were conducted to determine the local newspaper of the town; then the web archives of that newspaper were searched for the defendant's name. If cases were found there, then a map search was done for the nearest city, a search was conducted for that city's newspaper, then that newspaper archive was searched for the defendant's name. Finally, a general Google search was conducted using the defendant's

name to ensure that no other relevant or nearby urban newspapers covered the story. This was done to eliminate potential error on the researcher's part in choosing the nearest city.

The fourth criterion was that the cases needed to vary by region of the country. There were a considerable number of cases that presented themselves from one state, but because a case had already been chosen from that region, those cases were eliminated from the sample. This was done to present data that would be more representative of the entire nation and to eliminate concern that findings would be unique to one part of the country.

Finally, the cases chosen were based on their availability through the websites of the newspapers.

Based on these five criteria, the following cases were chosen and articles found on the websites listed. The total number of articles included in the sample was 213.

- Tonya Craft, Ringgold, GA – The Catoosa County News at [catwalkchatt.com](http://catwalkchatt.com) ( $N = 69$ ) and The Chattanooga Times Free Press at [timesfreepress.com](http://timesfreepress.com) ( $N = 85$ ).
- Sean Lanigan, Centreville, VA – CentreView at [connectionnewspapers.com](http://connectionnewspapers.com) ( $N = 9$ ) and The Washington Post at [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com) ( $N = 5$ ).
- Peter Ziskin, Vista, CA – The North County Times at [nctimes.com](http://nctimes.com) ( $N = 12$ ) and The San Diego Union-Tribune at [signonsandiego.com](http://signonsandiego.com) ( $N = 16$ ).
- Vito Granieri, Norristown, PA – The Times Herald at [timesherald.com](http://timesherald.com) ( $N = 13$ ) and The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Daily News at [philly.com](http://philly.com) ( $N = 4$ ).

It is important to note that findings from this cannot be generalized beyond the sample because it is not a random, national sample.

## **Background on the cases chosen**

Tonya Craft was a kindergarten teacher in Ringgold, GA. She was accused in 2008 of molesting several female students. The case went to trial in 2010, and she was found not guilty. The local newspaper The Catoosa County News covered her story in their print editions and on their website, [catwalkchatt.com](http://catwalkchatt.com). The paper has a circulation of more than 4,000 and the population of Ringgold, GA was 2,770, according to the 2005-2009 American Community Survey estimates by the U.S. Census Bureau. The Chattanooga Times Free Press also followed the story. Chattanooga, TN is the nearest urban area to Ringgold, less than 30 miles away. The Chattanooga Times Free Press circulation was 68,493 (2008 Editor & Publisher) and the population of Chattanooga was 169,243 in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey. When Craft's case went to trial, major networks such as NBC and CNN also covered it. While [catwalkchatt.com](http://catwalkchatt.com) posted stories to its website from other sources such as local television stations, these were not included in the sample because they were not written by staff writers of the newspaper. Stories following her trial concerning her television appearances and lawsuits also were not included in the sample.

Sean Lanigan was a physical education teacher in Centreville, VA. He was accused in February 2010 of molesting a female student and was found not guilty in his trial in May 2010. The community newspaper was part of a collaboration of newspapers, including Alexandria Gazette Packet, CentreView, Mount Vernon Gazette, and Potomac Almanac, found at [connectionnewspapers.com](http://connectionnewspapers.com). The articles on this case came only from the newspaper CentreView, which has a circulation of 19,888 (2008 Editor & Publisher). The population of Centreville was 53,876 in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey. The Washington Post,

with a circulation of 594,858, also covered the case. The population of Washington, D.C., was 588,433 in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey.

Peter Ziskin was a middle school math and humanities teacher in Vista, CA, accused in 2005 of molesting boys while roughhousing with them. When his case went to trial, he was convicted of 17 of the 26 charges and sentenced to 15 years to life in prison. He appealed, but a state appeals court upheld the conviction in 2008. His case was followed by the locally focused newspaper North County Times, with a circulation of more than 86,852 (2008 Editor & Publisher) and the urban newspaper San Diego Union-Tribune – circulation of 278,379 (2008 Editor & Publisher) – on their website signonsandiego.com. Vista’s population was 90,356, and San Diego’s population was 1,297,618 in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey.

Vito Granieri was a teacher’s aide in Norristown, PA, who was accused of inappropriate contact with underage boys. Granieri entered an Alford plea, which is not an admission of guilt, but an acknowledgment that prosecutors have enough evidence to convict in a trial. This plea is treated the same as conviction for sentencing purposes, and Granieri was sentenced to six to 18 years in prison and 15 years’ probation. This case was reported by the local newspaper The Times Herald, whose circulation is 13,751 (2008 Editor & Publisher), and a few articles appeared in the Philadelphia newspapers, The Philadelphia Inquirer and The Philadelphia Daily News, found on their shared website philly.com. Their circulations, listed separately in 2008 Editor & Publisher Yearbook, were greater than 450,000 combined. Norristown’s population was 31,199, and Philadelphia’s population was 1,531,112 in the 2005-2009 American Community Survey.

In addition, ~~structural pluralism number~~ a figure for structural pluralism of the community was calculated based on city population, number of banks (a proxy for number of

businesses, used because banks are necessary to all community businesses), number of high schools and number of churches (Tichenor, et al., 1980). Population data were gathered from the 2005-2009 American Community Survey and the other data were gathered from yellowpages.com. Each category was searched and counted within a three-mile radius of the city center. Data were converted into standardized z scores, which are calculated by taking the score, subtracting the mean and dividing that number by the standard deviation. A z score is found so that numbers with different metrics, such as percentages and raw numbers, can be added. The z scores for each city were then added to determine the final structural pluralism score for each city. The structural pluralism number for each city and the data used to determine that number are reported in Table 4.1 in the findings chapter.

### **Content Analysis**

A content analysis was chosen as the method because it is a way to systematically analyze media messages and attributes, and to quantify these messages in order to measure variables. Content analysis is best for assessing a large quantity of media messages, such as a year's worth of newspapers, or many articles following one topic. It is also a good technique for comparison, as is done in this study – comparing the way objectivity is practiced in towns with differing degrees of pluralism (Zhou & Sloan, 2009). These messages were assessed in terms of levels of objectivity found in the stories, presence or lack of particular frames used for the stories (discussed below), and type of news story presented (hard or soft). The unit of analysis is story paragraphs for the analysis testing the first hypothesis, and then the entire story for the analyses of the remaining hypotheses and research question.

After cases were chosen, each article was printed and numbered. Each case was assigned a number and divided into community newspaper and urban newspaper and labeled A or B. Then

each article was numbered, leading to code numbers such as 03B15 (meaning the 15<sup>th</sup> article in the urban paper about the third molestation case).

To test intercoder reliability, the researcher and co-coder first randomly drew 10 percent of the sampled stories from each newspaper for the reliability testing. The researcher created a coding protocol and trained the second coder. Before beginning the coding, the coders attempted some informal coding in order to identify and work out problems in the protocol. Based on the coding protocol, the coders attempted to achieve 80 percent reliability based on Scott's Pi and Pearson correlation. Results of the Scott's Pi test for intercoder reliability for all four variables ranged from .84 to 1, and the Pearson correlation for objectivity scores ranged from .81 to .98, which is within the acceptable range.

The sample used to achieve intercoder reliability was reintegrated into the overall sample because the sample size would be significantly reduced without those articles. However, statistics run with and without those articles showed no significant difference in the results.

## **Variables**

The first antecedent (independent) variable is pluralism of the communities. As mentioned above, pluralism scores were determined based on prior measures used by other researchers, and these measures were standardized and summed (Tichenor, Donohue & Olien, 1980). The measures used were city population, number of banks, number of high schools and number of churches. These variables are pertinent to a study on power structure, because each institution indicates a power source in the community.

Conflict framing was measured by the existence of two highly distinguished and contradictory sides presented in the article (68.1% no conflict frame, 31.9% conflict frame present). If the coders saw the presence of conflicting, contradictory sides in the story as a

dominant aspect of the story, and this presence was evident within the first six paragraphs of the story, then the story was coded as a conflict frame (yes = 1). If coders saw no evidence of a dominant presence of conflicting sides in the story within the first six paragraphs, then the story was coded as no conflict frame (no = 0). If the coders were unsure, they coded it as unsure = 2. The unit for analysis for conflict framing was the article.

A consensus frame was recognized as a problem/solution framework of the story (99.5% no consensus frame, .5% consensus frame). If it was clear that a problem was identified within the story, and that a solution was either presented as possible or already in progress for the situation, it was coded as a consensus frame (yes = 1); however, if there was not a clear problem/solution within the article, then the article was coded as no consensus frame (no = 0). If the coders were unsure, they coded as unsure = 2. The unit of analysis for consensus framing was the article.

To determine the type of news story as hard (spot) news or soft news, the story was evaluated for its type of lede, by use of inverted pyramid style and by presence of timeliness (90% of the articles were coded hard news, 10% were coded soft news). A hard news story used an inverted pyramid hard news lede and the focus of the story was about an immediate event (either just past or upcoming) —i.e., it had the element of timeliness. If those two elements were present in the story, it was coded as a hard news story (yes = 1). If these two aspects were not present in the story, then the story was coded as a soft news story (no = 0). The unit of analysis for determining hard or soft news was the article as a whole.

Finally, degree of objectivity was determined based on balance of sourcing. Each assertion in the story was coded as pro-defendant, anti-defendant or neutral. If the assertion was deemed one that the defendant or anyone on the defense team would be happy about appearing in

the story, then it was coded as a pro-defendant assertion. If it was decided that the defense team would not be happy with the assertion made, it was coded as anti-defendant. A neutral assertion was an assertion that either clearly was not related to the guilt or innocence of the defendant, or that was otherwise very difficult for the coder to determine. Paragraphs were numbered in each story, and the number paragraph that the assertion was in was coded. The unit of analysis for objectivity was the paragraph.

The balance of assertions in the articles were evaluated based on their position in the story. It was expected that journalists would be aware that readers would be more likely to encounter assertions placed higher in a story (Anderson & Lowrey, 2007; Fico & Cote, 1999; Fico et al., 2004). Using a modified version of a measure adopted by Fico and colleagues (2004), assertions were coded as to whether they appear in the first five paragraphs or in paragraphs six and lower. The number of the paragraph in which the attribution appears was coded on the coding sheet under the type of assertion. Ultimately, assertions appearing in paragraphs one through five were scored as “1” and the sources appearing later in the story were scored as half of one.

Pro-defendant assertion paragraphs were then summed. The total was figured as a percent of total story paragraphs, as was the total anti-defendant assertions. Neutral assertions were ignored for this study. The difference between “pro” and “anti” percentages (converted to decimals) was subtracted from 1 in order to produce a ratio-level measure of the degree to which sources are balanced, with “1” equal to perfect source balance, and “0” equal to no source balance ( $M = .87$ ,  $SD = .16$ ). This measure of balance served as a measure of the degree to which journalists are practicing “objectivity” in writing and editing the stories (Anderson & Lowrey, 2007).

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

The first hypothesis stated that it was expected that the newspaper stories would differ in degree of objectivity based on the newspaper communities' level of structural pluralism and that newspapers in less pluralistic communities would exhibit less objectivity in their reporting of the child molestation cases.

Structural pluralism scores were calculated for each city (see Table 4.1). Data were gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau's 2000 census for city population, county per-capita income, the percent of county labor force not in agriculture and the percent of the city population with a bachelor's degree. That data was then converted into z scores, which are calculated by taking the number subtracting the mean and dividing that number by the standard deviation. A z score is found so that numbers with different values, such as percentages and raw numbers, can be added. The z scores for each city were then added to determine the final structural pluralism score for each city.

Table 4.1

*Structural pluralism figures*

	City Population	Number of banks	Number of high schools	Number of churches	Structural pluralism
Ringgold, GA	2,770	3	1	13	-9.66
Chattanooga, TN	169,243	36	2	137	-8.34
Centreville, VA	53,876	24	1	26	-9.28
Washington, D.C.	588,433	236	10	370	-3.39
Vista, CA	90,356	22	7	76	-8.32
San Diego, CA	1,297,618	73	5	136	-5.73
Norristown, PA	31,199	43	5	84	-8.37
Philadelphia, PA	1,531,112	192	27	675	0.98

As discussed in detail in the Methods section, objectivity scores were calculated by obtaining a difference between the ratios of negative and positive assertions by story sources, and subtracting from 1. This method resulted in scores for objectivity that ranged from 0 to 1, with 1 being perfect balance between number of positive and negative source assertions – in other words, complete objectivity. These scores were then used in an independent samples t-test to determine whether or not level of the community’s structural pluralism had a significant impact on level of objectivity. It should be noted that significance testing is used in these tests only as a conventional, informal indicant of strength of relationship. Data were based on a census of stories pertaining to the molestation cases in each city, and so because a random sample was not drawn from a population, parametric statistics are not relevant.

The mean objectivity score for newspapers with low structural pluralism was .88 and the mean score for newspapers with high structural pluralism was .86. The t-test revealed that the difference was not significant,  $t(211) = .88, p = .38$  (see Table 4.2).

T-tests were also conducted to see if other configurations in the data set might yield significant differences. In the first such test, blog articles were eliminated to see if the unique

format and tone of the blog form might be having an effect on the results. Eliminating all blog articles yielded a mean of .87 for stories in low structural pluralism communities and .86 for stories in high structural pluralism communities. The difference was not significant,  $t(189) = .22, p = .82$ .

Tests were also run on each individual case, as differences in degree of pluralism (between large and small communities) differed from case to case. For the Georgia case, the mean objectivity score for low structural pluralism was .90 and the mean for high structural pluralism was .87. The difference was not significant,  $t(152) = 1.29, p = .20$ . A test of only the Virginia case found yielded a mean of .82 for low structural pluralism and .81 for high structural pluralism. The results were not significant,  $t(12) = .04, p = .97$ . The test for only the California case yielded a mean of .90 for low structural pluralism and .85 for high structural pluralism, not significant,  $t(26) = .80, p = .43$ . The test of the Pennsylvania case yielded a mean of .82 for low structural pluralism and .87 for high structural pluralism, again not significant,  $t(15) = -.78, p = .45$ . The test for all papers except for the Georgia case yielded means of .85 for low structural pluralism and .84 for high structural pluralism. Consistent with the other analyses, the results were not significant,  $t(57) = .05, p = .96$  (see Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

*T-test results*

	Low structural pluralism mean	High structural pluralism mean	<i>t</i>	Degree of Freedom	<i>p</i> value
All data	0.88	0.86	0.88	211	0.38
Excluding blogs	0.87	0.86	0.22	189	0.82
Excluding GA	0.85	0.84	0.05	57	0.96
Georgia	0.90	0.87	1.29	152	0.20
Virginia	0.82	0.81	0.04	12	0.97
California	0.90	0.85	0.80	26	0.43
Pennsylvania	0.82	0.87	-0.76	15	0.45

A Chi-Square test was run as a test of the research question of whether newspapers in communities with low structural pluralism are more likely to run soft news stories than papers in communities with high structural pluralism. The test found that the papers ran close to the same percentage of soft news stories, regardless of their communities' pluralism. Newspapers in both levels of community pluralism ran 90% hard news stories and 10% soft news stories,  $X^2(1, N = 213) = .005, p = .94$  (see Table 4.3).

In the analysis of conflict frame usage as predicted in Hypothesis 2, a Chi-square test found no significant difference. The test found that 69% of newspapers in communities with low structural pluralism used conflict frames, and 67% of newspapers in communities with high structural pluralism used conflict frames,  $X^2(1, N = 213) = .067, p = .80$  (see Table 4.3).

Only one article in the entire sample was found to have a consensus frame. For newspapers with low structural pluralism, there was 99% with no consensus frames and only 1% using consensus frames and in newspapers with high structural pluralism there was 100% of cases without consensus frames,  $X^2(1, N = 213) = 1.073, p = .30$  (see Table 4.3). However,

because results showed only one positive case, the sample does not lend itself well to statistical analysis because there is not enough variability.

Table 4.3

*Chi-square test results*

	Low structural pluralism	High structural pluralism	Chi-Square Statistic	degree of freedom	<i>p</i> value
Percent stories with hard news	90.3	90.0	0.01	1	0.94
Percent stories with soft news	9.7	10.0			
Percent stories with conflict frame	68.9	67.3	0.07	1	0.80
Percent stories with no conflict frame	31.1	32.7			
Percent stories with consensus frame	99.0	100.0	1.07	1	0.30
Percent stories with no consensus frame	1.0	0.0			

Therefore, the results from statistical tests showed no significant support for the proposed hypotheses and research questions. However, some of the findings lend themselves to interesting conclusions and suggest new research. This research was limited to court cases, which has a unique structure of its own. This data suggests that the court system transcends structural pluralism. Because the court system has built-in balance – in other words, a built-in split between defense and prosecution, and by nature, presents both sides, reporters may not have to work hard to seek out opposing sides. For example, these are both presented to them every day in the courtroom. Therefore, regardless of the pluralism of the community, the reporter will likely find both sides of the story very easily, and there will be strong normative pressure to

present both sides evenly, as “balance” is institutionalized into the system. In communities of low structural pluralism, they do not have to search beyond the governing groups of the community to find alternative viewpoints; therefore, their reporting of court cases can be more objective. Reporters are able to rest on journalistic conventions and achieve objectivity.

One interesting set of data was that of the objectivity in the Pennsylvania papers, and to a lesser degree in the Georgia papers. Though the difference was not significant, the less pluralistic community’s paper in Pennsylvania had substantially lower objectivity scores, which was the direction predicted by the hypothesis. It’s worth noting that this case offered the greatest gap between newspaper circulation and town population between the low pluralistic community and higher pluralistic community. In the other two cases, the Virginia and California papers, the mean difference was larger and went in the opposite direction to the hypothesis, with the smaller papers being more objective. Also, the small Georgia and Pennsylvania papers had the smallest circulation and smallest town populations across all four cases. So, there seems to be some hint here that a wider sample of cases that included greater disparity between large and small papers and large and small town populations may have lent some support to the hypothesis. This argument is based on speculation: There was no doubt that for this particular study, the difference in objectivity for the Pennsylvania papers was not statistically significant. But lack of statistical significance could also partly be a result of the low number of stories analyzed for this case.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

The findings for this study found data that did not support any of the hypotheses. However, some interesting conclusions could be drawn from these null results.

Hypothesis 1 stated that the researcher expected to find less objectivity in the newspapers in less pluralistic communities than in the newspapers in the more pluralistic communities. However, the data showed that newspapers in both types of communities had roughly the same level of objectivity, with little variation. While the hypothesis was not supported, inferences can be made from the data. It was interesting that the level of objectivity was high across the papers – mostly in the .80 to .90 range. One possible reason for this level of objectivity could be the type of stories researched. The stories in the sample were on court cases, and it is possible that the court system creates a structure that enforces objectivity. In many other types of conflict stories, journalists get information from official entities, but often must search out balance from citizens or “non-official” organizations. However, in the case of the court system, both sides are built into the government process. Because both sides of the case are given on a daily basis inside the court, it is easy for the reporter to get both the prosecution and the defense’s view on the case. It would almost be harder for the newspaper to report the case in a biased manner, because they would have to purposefully leave out information that was given to them in the courtroom. And so findings from this study may show that there are some entities that transcend

the impact of structural pluralism on news content – that the court system gives reporters both sides of the argument regardless of the size of the community.

Tichenor, Olien and Donohue (e.g. 1968, 1980) wrote much of their research on the theory of structural pluralism before the rise of the Internet. It is possible that the way that editors and reporters work today in smaller newsrooms has changed so much that the effect of structural pluralism may be minimized. During the time that structural pluralism was studied by these scholars, small newsrooms were more likely to rely on their own practices and less likely to imitate the larger newspapers (though mimicry was not unknown). However, since the Internet was introduced to the newsroom, mimicry is easier to achieve (see Boczkowski, 2010). This may have created more balance between the newsrooms of the more and less pluralistic communities in terms of forms and practices. Also, the Internet expands network connections to information for papers of all sizes, potentially decreasing the effects from community structural pluralism on the objectivity of a newspaper.

So, while the data did not support the hypothesis that there would be a difference in the level of objectivity based on the structural pluralism of the town the newspaper operates in, it could show interesting aspects of the contemporary newsroom, objectivity, and the court system.

Research question 1 asked to what degree level of pluralism would predict the use of hard news or soft news formats. The findings showed that the level of pluralism had no effect on the percent of soft news stories that ran compared to the percent of hard news stories. In fact, the numbers showed that in both levels of pluralism, the newspapers ran 90% hard news stories and 10% soft news stories. So, the data did not support the idea that one would find more soft news stories in newspapers in communities of one level of pluralism than in the other, whether it was the greater or the lesser pluralistic community. These results may indicate that court cases are

not conducive to soft news stories. Soft news is a more interpretive story writing technique, and it may be that the structured nature of court cases does not lend themselves as readily to this interpretation. The fact that many newsroom staffs are shrinking and overworked may have an impact as well as this low number of features accompanying the straight news accounts.

Another conclusion that may be drawn from the findings of the hard news/soft news hypothesis is that there may have been something unique about the Tonya Craft case that made it a better story for soft news in newspapers in both community sizes. All but one of the articles coded as soft news came from the Ringgold, GA case. It was hypothesized that soft news would be found more in the newspapers in less pluralistic communities; however, it may be that, in court cases, the details of the trial itself might strongly predict the use of soft news. There were several unique circumstances to the Tonya Craft trial that might have made it more interesting in soft news form. These circumstances include the amount of national news attention the case received, the amount of online presence for the trial, and the lengthy nature of the case. These circumstances might have led directly to the soft news articles like the narrative of the case from arrest to verdict, articles about the news coverage, and commentary on the effects of the case on the community.

Hypothesis 2 stated that newspapers in less pluralistic communities would use more consensus frames. Because the results showed only one positive case, the sample does not lend itself well to statistical analysis because there is not enough variability. It was expected that the newspapers in less pluralistic communities would desire to create consensus in their community and show that, even though the tension of the case might be creating strife among the community members, there were ways to rise above the strife and create a sense of community. However, there was only one such consensus frame found in the entire sample. This might show that the

newspapers did not feel the need to create that sense of community, for example, as depicted in notions of civic and public journalism. (According to those in favor of public journalism, the less pluralistic community newspapers would have been more likely to try to create a sense of community by attempting to show solutions to the conflict [consensus frames] in order to aid their community in their understanding of the community conflict.)

Hypothesis 3 also was not supported by the data. The number of conflict frames was very close to the same in the newspapers in more pluralistic communities as it was in the newspapers in less pluralistic communities. This may be due to the conflicting and dichotomous nature of the court system, more than editorial decision in the newsrooms. The frame was defined as a dominant presence of multiple points of view in the first six paragraphs of the story. Because many of the stories were relating court testimony and objections, it would follow that the first few paragraphs would show discord between the prosecution and the defense. Therefore, conflict frames may just be a result of the structure of court reporting, rather than a particular editorial decision by the reporter or editor of a newspaper.

Ultimately, the findings from this study suggest that the theory of structural pluralism may need to be reworked a little to include, as a variable that can be studied, the type of news event, or the nature of the institutions being covered, as a moderating factor. It is likely that with any sort of court case, molestation, theft, or murder, the nature of the structure that is present in the court system will affect the results of structural pluralism. However, structural pluralism may still be powerful in predicting the level of objectivity that would be found when covering other types of community conflict, such as environmental issues – a popular issue in structural pluralism studies.

Future research in this area might include how the Internet has affected the newsroom. If editors and reporters have easier access to data and are able to mimic larger newspapers, then the differences between newspapers in more and less pluralistic communities proposed by the theory of structural pluralism may not be as prominent anymore (Boczkowski, 2010). In future studies, researchers may also want to sample even smaller communities, and obtain even greater differences between less and greater pluralism. They may also focus on a different type of community conflict.

### **Limitations**

The limitations for this study include the sample size, the type of news story and the relative size of some of the newspapers included in the study. The sample size for this study was 213 articles and they were chosen from a limited selection, rather than a national, random sample. In addition, some of the individual cases did not include a large number of articles to test. A larger sample size that includes more cases and newspapers might yield different results. Also, a similar study using a different type of community issue might yield different results, especially if the topic has less structure than the court system. Finally, the less pluralistic newspaper in the California case did not have as low a pluralism number as the other low pluralistic newspapers – though the pluralism score was lower than its more pluralistic counterpart – so that might have had an effect on the data, though the t-tests run for each individual case did not yield drastically different results

In sum, based on the measures used to determine objectivity, it was found that the levels of objectivity did not differ greatly from the newspapers in low pluralistic communities to those in the higher pluralistic communities. Their use of the other journalistic characteristics measured, framing and news type, also did not differ greatly. These findings cannot be

generalized beyond the sample, but they do suggest new research into the limits of structural pluralism and the likelihood of mimicry in the Internet age.

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## APPENDIX A

### CODING PROTOCOL

Coding protocol for objectivity study

#### **Overview**

This protocol is aimed at assessing degree of objectivity in articles on child molestation cases based on the pluralism of the town in which the newspaper publishes. All articles from a community newspaper and an urban paper on four cases will be analyzed.

Coders are to record the name of the newspaper, the city and state of the newspaper, the number of words in the story, and the number of paragraphs in the story. Coders will also indicate the type of story written. These categories include news, news analysis, blog, letter to editor, and update. Coders will then determine if there is a conflict frame or not, a consensus frame or not, and if the story is hard news or soft news. Coders then record source assertions by writing, in the cells on the coding sheet, the number of the paragraph in which the assertion appears in the story. For example, if a “pro-defense” assertion appears in paragraphs 2 and 5 of the story, coders would write “2” in one cell under the “pro-defense assertions” category and “5” in a second cell under the same category. There are 10 cells for each case under each source-type category. If there are more than 10 assertions of a particular source type, only the first 10 are to be coded.

Three different types of source assertions are coded: (1) pro-defense assertions, (2) anti-defense assertions, (3) neutral assertions. The following definitions are important in analyzing the news stories under study.

#### **Source**

A source is a person, an organization, a study, a report or a publication that provides information to news reporters.

#### **Assertions**

It is assumed that an assertion must be attributed to a source. This means an assertion is linked with verbs denoting a source speaking, such as “said,” “say,” “says,” “claimed,” “announced,” “reported,” “stated,” “detailed,” etc. Or an assertion may also be linked with phrases such as “according to,” etc. An assertion may either be a direct quote, or a paraphrase of a quote. Some assertions may be direct quotes in which the verb (said, claimed, etc.) is not used.

If there is no attribution or quote marks, as detailed above, the paragraph should not be coded in any category. It is ignored.

For blog posts, each posting (time stamp) will be considered a paragraph. In these cases, assign pro, anti, or neutral to each assertion made within the paragraph, then the designation that has the most assertions within that paragraph will be coded as such. For example, if a posting as 2 neutral assertions, 4 pro-defendant assertions, and 1 anti-defendant assertion, the paragraph is coded as pro-defendant.

#### *Pro-defendant assertions*

These are assertions that the defendant or anyone on the defense team would be pleased by. If the comment helps the defendant's case or is pleasing to them, it is a pro-defendant assertion.

Example: "The defendant was a wonderful teacher when my child was in her class; I don't believe she did this," said Mary Major.

#### *Anti-defendant assertions*

These are assertions that would hurt the defendant or defense team in their case, or statements that make them look bad. Any statement that they would not want to see in that story is an anti-defendant assertion.

Example: "I always thought there was something wrong with the way she handled my child. I'm glad they finally caught her," said Billy Baker.

#### *Neutral assertions*

These assertions are neither helpful nor harmful to the defendant. They can come from official sources or studies that do not comment on likelihood of guilt or innocence of the accused, or people who give vague comments.

Example: "I don't really know him that well and my child was never in his class," said Jess Marano.

OR

"42% of children are molested between the ages of 5 and 12," according to the National Survey of Children's Health.

#### *Making difficult decisions about assertions*

In trying to decide whether an assertion is pro-defendant, anti-defendant or neutral, go through the following steps:

1. Ask yourself, if the defense team woke up and read this assertion in the morning paper, would they react positively, negatively, or not care? If the reaction would likely be positive, then the assertion should be coded as pro-defendant. If the reaction would likely be negative, then the assertion is anti-defendant. If the defense team would not care about the statement, then the statement would be neutral. Also, if you find yourself struggling over whether individual sentences in a paragraph are pro or anti (if none of the sentences seem to nearly fit pro or anti), put it in neutral (BUT see #2 below).
2. In some cases a paragraph may have two sentences, each which seems to fit in different categories. If one sentence seems neutral and the other sentence seems pro or anti, then

code the paragraph as pro or anti. If one sentence seems pro and the other seems anti (not likely, but it might happen), then code the paragraph as neutral.

### **Number of sources**

Coders will need to count the number of sources in each story. This is number of sources, not number of statements by sources. So a story with one paragraph by a defense team member, two paragraphs by a prosecuting team member, three paragraphs from a friend of the defendant and two paragraphs from a report would be four sources (defense, prosecution, friend, report). Record this number in the far right column on the second page of the coding sheets.

Adapted from coding protocol for news control study by Wilson Lowrey

### **Conflict frame**

A conflict frame will be determined by the presence of a clear dominance of two highly oppositional sides presented in the story. If the coders see that conflicting, contradictory sides in the story is a dominant aspect of the story, and that this presence is evident within the first six paragraphs of the story, then the story will be coded as a conflict frame (1). If coders see no evidence of a dominant presence of conflicting sides in the story within the first six paragraphs, there is no recognizable usage of viewpoints that are at odds with each other, then the story will be coded as no conflict frame (0). If the coders are unsure, they will code as unsure (2). Careful scrutiny should be given to the assertions in the first six paragraphs to be sure that a conflict frame is not clearly presented.

### **Consensus frame**

A consensus frame will be recognized as a problem/solution framework of the story. If it becomes clear that a problem is identified within the story, and that a solution is either presented as possible or already in progress for the situation, it will be coded as a consensus frame (1); however, if there is not a clear problem/solution structure in the article, then the article will be coded as no consensus frame (0). If the coders are unsure, they will code as unsure (2).

Careful scrutiny should be given to the framework to be sure that a consensus frame is not presented through the article.

### **Hard News/Soft News**

To determine the type of news story as hard (spot) news or soft news, the story will be evaluated for its type of lede and the focus of the story or presence of timeliness. A hard news story will use an inverted pyramid “hard news” lede and the focus of the story will be about an immediate particular event (either just past or upcoming)—i.e., it will have the element of timeliness. If those elements are present in the story, it will be coded as a hard news story (1). If a story does not appear to use inverted pyramid style, the lede is anecdotal and the element of timeliness is not apparent, then the story will be coded as a soft news story (0).

### **Article Type**

Coders will determine what type of article category each falls into. These categories will be coded as news stories (1), blog posts (2), news analysis (3), news update (4), letter to the editor (5), opinion (6), narrative (7).

