

**DOWN-HOME DEMOCRACY:
MEASURING CITIZENS' RESPONSE
TO SMALL NEWSPAPERS' COVERAGE OF LOCAL ELECTIONS**

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ABSTRACT

This two-tiered survey research explores whether changes in the quantity and quality of local election coverage at small community newspapers coincides with any change in the behaviors and attitudes of readers/residents toward that coverage. It also tests whether attention to newspaper election reports – both in print and online – is correlated with knowledge about election races and issues or with the perceived value of those reports. Three small Missouri newspapers were recruited to participate. Baseline surveys of residents in their readership areas were conducted in 2013, and staff members from the newspapers then attended a 2014 workshop to learn new strategies for covering municipal elections — those for city councils, town boards, school boards and local ballot issues. After the newspapers employed some of those strategies during the 2014 municipal election campaign, a second survey was conducted to determine whether the changes resonated with residents or changed their attitudes toward election-related journalism or toward municipal elections themselves. The paper also explores reader preferences for types and formats of newspaper election coverage and makes suggestions for further research on community newspapers’ election journalism, which to date has been seldom studied.

INTRODUCTION

Elections present among the best opportunities for community newspapers to meet their most important purposes: those of promoting the democracy and empowering readers to contribute to solutions to community challenges. News that helps voters set the agenda for election debates, to decide which candidates are most suited for public office, and to help them choose how to vote on ballot measures is among the most valuable services journalists can provide.

Research, however, shows that election coverage in American news media is terribly flawed. Horserace frames that focus on who's leading, who's got the money and the strategies candidates employ to win votes dominate election news, making the public cynical about participating (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997; Gans, 2003; Entman, 1989; Patterson, 2000). Most of this research, though, is focused at the national level; little literature examines coverage of local ballot measures and elections for city councils, boards of aldermen or school boards, for example. That's too bad, because local politics is the arena in which community journalism is in position to have the most impact. Even at the hyper-local level, there's a heavy dose of theoretical effects at work.

Gans (2003) writes of "small-town pastoralism," an ideal of rural community life that fosters "cohesiveness, friendliness and slow pace" (p. 48). Even this utopian type of American settlement, though, comes with built-in baggage. When a community adopts "small" as part of its identity, "bigness," in turn, becomes the enemy. The dichotomy often manifests in public debates – and local political campaigns – that pit the interests of a community's social and natural environments against the necessity and benefits of growth and development (Gans, p. 49). Only local journalists are in position to provide constructive frames – particularly during election

cycles – that elucidate these sorts of issues and foster conversation about them rather than focusing on the divisive strategies and motivations of those seeking local office.

Small-town newspaper journalists have the unique ability, if they use it, to generate interest and encourage participation in local politics, to nurture community democracy and help people shape the environments in which they live. Baker (2002) cites “considerable evidence ... that newspapers ... are the main source of the public’s actual knowledge of current events.” Preliminary research (Swafford, 2012), however, shows that many small-town newspapers do little reporting on local elections at all. This is a serious failure. The news media’s most important role, Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011) tell us, is to give their audiences the information they need to self govern. Yankelovich (1991) yearns for a news media that not only will raise consciousness about political issues but also will help its audiences work through community problems to help reach quality public judgments about how to solve them. The bulk of reports in community newspapers satisfy neither goal, even when analyzed collectively, or as the “corpus” of journalism described by Carey (1986) and by Kovach and Rosenstiel (2011).

It’s also important to study newspaper election reporting and democratic processes in small towns because of the sheer number of people who live in them. A 2012 report (Wilson, et. al., for the U.S. Census Bureau) showed that in 2010, 16.3 percent of the U.S. population, or about 50.4 million people, lived in “micropolitan statistical areas” of 200,000 or fewer people. About 13.1 million, or 4.2 percent, lived in micropolitan areas with populations of 50,000 to 99,999; about 12.6 million, or 4.1 percent, lived in micropolitan areas of fewer than 50,000 people; and another 19.4 million, or 6.3 percent, lived in small communities outside micropolitan or metropolitan areas.

It's also important to study community newspapers' election journalism because of the large number of small papers that are operating. The National Newspaper Association reported in 2010 that 50 percent of its members have circulations less than 5,000. The average among non-dailies was 8,125, and the average among community dailies 34,515. In Missouri, where this research was conducted, the Missouri Press Association listed 268 members in 2014. Average circulation was 7,210 and median circulation 2,200. Given those significant numbers, and the fact that municipal elections are the most frequent and arguably have the most direct impact on citizens, thorough research on local election journalism is warranted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As McCleneghan and his colleagues have long pointed out (e.g., McCleneghan, 1980; 1983; McCleneghan & Raglund, 2002), local elections are more frequent than any other type, and many politicians get their start at the local level. Local elections allow community residents to become involved in ways that higher-level elections do not.

The vast majority of news research on political journalism, however, concentrates on state and national elections (Lieske, 1989), primarily on races for president but occasionally for positions in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives. Becker and Dunwoody (1982) lamented the fact and cited it as a reason for focusing on Cleveland's municipal election in 1979:

“Research on the political effects of the media, as well as research in politics in general, has been overly concerned with national, general elections.... Yet the likelihood that the information transmitted by the media would have significant consequences in terms of election outcomes should be markedly greater on the local level than on the national level. Many voters know little about local candidates before the campaigns get underway. And while interpersonal communication sources may well provide more information at the local level than is true in national races, for many voters the media remain the only sources of information on those candidates and the issues. It also may well be true that

behavior can be more easily modified or swayed in local elections than in national races” (p. 213).

The research that has been done on “local” election coverage misses the mark at which this research aims. Iyengar, Woo and McGrady (2005), for example, compared “horse-race” to “substantive” coverage of the 2004 presidential election with that of “local” campaigns for U.S. House and Senate seats at 37 newspapers across the country. They found more substantive, but far less, coverage of so-called local races. It’s difficult to see, though, how races for political offices that represent entire states or multiple counties could be considered truly local.

A few scholars have come closer. Lieske (1989) showed in a series of Cincinnati municipal elections that one of the most important predictors of vote totals was endorsement by the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. McCleneghan & Raglund (2002) showed that in 59 mayoral elections in 15 cities in New Mexico (1986-1998), newspaper election coverage (in total column inches) and newspaper endorsements were major predictors of election winners. Stevens (2006) examined television news about local elections in Minneapolis. Although he found the usual focus on strategy and horserace coverage of national campaigns, he discovered little or no reporting on local elections. Focus groups revealed voters frustrated with thin reporting by television stations that promoted themselves as providers of in-depth coverage.

Hankins (1998) studied two newspaper reporters’ work on mayoral elections in Denver, and found a heavy emphasis on horserace and game-frame coverage. She found that one reporter cast the candidates for mayor as “winners” or “losers” in 46 percent of his stories, the other in 31 percent. Shaker (2009), in an attempt to learn whether access to news correlated with local political knowledge, surveyed Philadelphians’ on their knowledge of that city’s 2007 mayoral election. He found that news media access does have a bearing on levels of local political

knowledge but that those familiar with local politics are no more likely than others to have higher levels of knowledge about national politics. As mentioned before, Becker and Dunwoody (1982) studied the impact of media use and public affairs knowledge on voting in the 1979 mayoral and city council elections in Cleveland, finding a significant link between media use and knowledge of candidates and, in turn, voter behavior (p. 217).

These latter studies – conceptually – are in line with the intent of this research, which is to study coverage of municipal elections. But Minneapolis, Denver, Philadelphia and Cleveland are among America’s largest cities, with populations in the hundreds of thousands or millions and where newspapers have circulation numbers unimaginable to the newspapers and journalists this study will focus upon. This research will add valuable insight to the literature by examining election coverage in much smaller cities and at much smaller newspapers.

Shaker’s findings present an opportunity to argue that local news is more important than national news in promoting individual participation in democracy. It’s also important to note that most research shows newspapers are the most important and influential sources of information about elections, particularly at the local level.

Becker and Dunwoody, in their study of the Cleveland elections, found that newspapers were the most commonly listed sources of information about local political races; 59.4 percent of participants indicated newspapers were their primary source of information about the mayoral election, and 53.1 said the same of information about other city council races. On a broader scale, Chaffee and Frank (1996) found that print media were consulted more often than television by people actively seeking political information about national elections. Television news, they found, tends to reach those who otherwise lack even basic information about a campaign, while newspapers serve to close knowledge gaps:

“Most conceptions of media effects assume a rather passive audience. This model is not especially appropriate for understanding political learning, since many people actively seek information. Where do people go to find political information? The answer is newspapers, according to most research. Newspaper use is consistently associated with informational purposes and with direct evidence of political information seeking” (p. 54).

Despite that assertion, Swafford (2012) showed that there is a relative paucity of meaningful news about municipal elections in smaller communities’ newspapers. Many of the 28 newspapers examined in that study accomplished little more than informing readers about who and what was on the ballot and offered only limited opportunities to learn what candidates stood for. There was virtually no reporting that examined whether candidate statements were accurate or whether their proposed solutions to community challenges were sound or feasible.

Altogether, the existing literature provides a solid foundation upon which this research can build. Because of the scarcity of news research related to small-town election journalism, however, much deeper study is warranted at that level. It’s unclear what kinds of election news content is important to small-town residents when it comes to inciting political participation. In fact, it’s unclear what types and formats of content those citizens even want. Of course, it is important to know where local politicians stand on local issues. It may be important to know who is contributing money to their campaigns. It may be important to know about their personal lives. Becker & Dunwoody (1982), for example, showed that in nearly all instances, the more people knew about each local candidate (for mayor and city council) the more likely they were to vote for that person.

There are other questions to answer as well. We don’t know whether people who pay attention to small newspapers’ coverage of local elections become more knowledgeable about local politics than others. We don’t know whether readers notice conscientious efforts by smaller newspapers to boost the quality and quantity of election coverage, or even whether the staffs of

smaller newspapers can significantly improve their election journalism without adding reporting resources. Those are all gaps this research attempts to fill.

We begin with a straightforward research question:

RQ1: Are the staffs of smaller newspapers able to significantly boost the quantity and quality of their local election coverage without additional reporting resources if they are persuaded to treat municipal elections as a priority in their newsroom?

We also posit the following hypotheses:

H1: Increases in the quality and quantity of newspapers' coverage of local elections will resonate with readers, as measured by the quality ratings survey respondents give that coverage.

H2: There will be a positive correlation between the reported importance of municipal elections and attention paid to both print and online consumption of newspapers' reporting on them.

H3: Those who report higher levels of newspaper readership and attention to local election news – both in print and online – will demonstrate more knowledge of issues and races on their local election ballot.

Finally, we pose the following research questions:

RQ2: What sources of information about local elections information will respondents report are most useful?

RQ3: What types of information about local elections will respondents report are most important?

RQ4: What election-journalism formats (e.g., narrative text, question-and-answer pieces, videos, etc.) will respondents report are most useful?

METHOD

This research offers a two-tiered study of local election coverage at three community newspapers in Missouri: the Branson Tri-Lakes News (circulation 8,000), the Sikeston Standard-Democrat (circulation 7,800) and the St. Joseph News-Press (circulation 26,800).

The Branson Tri-Lakes News operates in southwest Missouri and has a print circulation of approximately 8,000 (Missouri Press Association, 2014) that primarily serves readers in the

city of Branson, with a population of about 10,000, and smaller communities in Taney and Stone counties. It publishes a print newspaper twice each week, on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and updates its website semi-daily. The Tri-Lakes News is the latest manifestation of a newspaper operation that has existed in Branson for nearly 100 years. Its parent publication is Lancaster Management.

The Sikeston Standard-Democrat in southeast Missouri serves readers primarily in the city of Sikeston and smaller communities in Scott, New Madrid, Mississippi and Stoddard counties. It has a print circulation of approximately 7,900 (Missouri Press Association, 2014), and publishes a newspaper five days a week, excluding Tuesdays and Saturdays. It also has a website that is updated daily. The Standard-Democrat is owned by Rust Communications, which publishes dozens of community newspapers in Missouri, Tennessee, Iowa, Indiana, Nebraska, Kansas, Arkansas, and Idaho. The newspaper has been operating in Sikeston for more than 100 years and was purchased by Rust Communications in 2008.

The St. Joseph News-Press is a daily community newspaper in northwest Missouri with a print circulation of approximately 26,700 (Missouri Press Association, 2014). Although it primarily serves readers in St. Joseph, a city of about 77,000, it also bills itself as a regional newspaper serving as many as 17 counties in northwest Missouri, primarily Buchanan County, where St. Joseph is the county seat, and Platte County to the south. The St. Joseph paper and its partner television station, Fox 26 KNPN, are owned by the News-Press and Gazette Co., which owns several newspapers in the region as well as television stations across the western United States. The St. Joseph News-Press has been published in print since 1845 (St. Joseph-News Press website, 2014).

The three newspapers were chosen based in part on the findings of prior research (Swafford, 2012) that showed each of the publications had engaged in a modest amount of reporting on municipal elections in previous years and on their publishers' willingness to participate in a study to examine whether improvements in the type and volume of local election coverage would resonate with readers. Publishers from each paper committed to sending staff members to a workshop on local election coverage that was organized and hosted by the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism in the winter of 2014, and they committed to incorporating suggestions and strategies offered at the workshop. It also was important to ascertain to the extent possible whether April 2014 municipal ballots in each of the newspapers' coverage areas would feature significant contests for local political offices and/or significant local ballot issues that would warrant extensive coverage.

In order to compare the newspapers' election reporting in 2013 and 2014, the researchers catalogued every story or item related to municipal elections that each paper published during the campaign seasons of each year and did a content analysis to categorize the format/method and the information contained in those reports.

Election-related items were categorized by method/format as either (a) brief narratives; (b) longer narratives, (c) question-and-answer pieces, (d) personality profiles, (e) biographical summaries, (f) charts or grids comparing candidate stances, (g) audio interviews, (h) video, (i) online live chats, (j) documentary photos, (k) databases, (l) published public records, or (m) graphics/maps. They were categorized by content as information about (a) ballot issues; (b) candidates' stances; (c) candidate forums; (d) accuracy of candidate statements; (e) exploration of candidate stances; (f) literacy, i.e., simple lists of who and what would appear on the ballot,

announcements of campaign events, or how to participate in the election; (g) campaign finance; (h) campaign strategy; or (i) opinion.

This study is also based on Time 1 and Time 2 surveys of residents in each of the newspapers' readership areas. The Time 1 survey was conducted in November and December 2013. A total of 1,244 residents were surveyed: 407 each in the Branson and Sikeston areas and 430 in the St. Joseph area. A total of 925 surveys were conducted through random-digit dialing of telephone numbers in zip codes within each paper's broad circulation area. Another 319 were conducted through an online questionnaire that was sent to the email addresses of randomly selected subscribers to each newspaper. Subscriber email lists were provided by the publishers of each newspaper.

The Time 2 survey was conducted in June 2014, beginning about eight weeks after the culmination of the 2014 municipal campaign season on Election Day, April 8. A total of 863 people were surveyed: 248 in Branson, 200 in Sikeston and 415 in St. Joseph. There were 193 responses to online surveys sent to subscribers, including 56 who participated in the Time 1 survey. A total of 620 respondents were reached by phone, 278 through random-digit dialing and 342 by following up with Time 1 survey participants who agreed to participate in the follow-up questionnaire. There were fewer Time 2 surveys as a result of a decision to limit the second round to respondents who lived in zip codes in the newspapers' primary coverage areas.

Both surveys, conducted by staff at the RJI Insight and Survey Center, sought to measure:

The level of importance people place on the races and issues that arise in municipal elections (alpha = .91). Respondents were asked to rank on a Likert scale of 1-5, with 5 being "very important" and 1 being "not important at all" the importance of reporting on local bond issues and tax increases, races for city council or town board seats, races for school board seats,

and races for positions on other local government boards. They also were asked to indicate how important they view voting in municipal elections to be.

Respondents' consumption of election news in print and online newspaper reports.

Participants were asked how often they read a print edition of their local paper, ranging from zero days to seven days per week, and to indicate whether they had accessed their local newspaper's website within the past day (4), the past seven days (3), the past 8 to 30 days (2), more than 30 days ago (1), or not at all (0). They also were asked to rate on a Likert scale of 1 to 5 how much attention they pay to newspaper election reporting both in print and online, with 5 being "a lot of attention" and 1 being "no attention at all."

A total score for "print attention" was calculated for each respondent by multiplying the value of numbers of days per week they read the print edition of their paper by the Likert scale value they gave for attention to the newspaper's local election news. A respondent who said they read the local paper three days per week (3) and paid "a lot of attention" to its local election news (5), for example, received a score of 15. "Web attention" scores also were calculated in similar fashion. A respondent who indicated he or she had accessed their newspaper's website within the past day (4) and who paid "some attention" to its local election news (3), for example, received a score of 12.

Respondents' levels of knowledge about local politics and elections. In the Time 1 survey, knowledge was measured according to responses to three questions: "In your town, are decisions in city government made by a city council, a board of aldermen or a board of trustees?", "In your town, what is the term of office for a member of the city council, board of aldermen or board of trustees?", and "In your town, what is the term of office for a member of the board of education?" Responses were scored 1 if correct and 0 if incorrect or if no response

was recorded. Thus, knowledge was measured in terms of the number of correct answers from 0 to 3. It was the decision of the researchers to keep knowledge questions in the Time 1 survey general, given the significant lag time between the April 2013 election and the time the survey was administered in November and December 2013.

In the Time 2 survey, respondents were asked specific factual questions about races and issues that appeared on the April 2014 ballot. (See Appendix 1 for a complete list of the Time 2 knowledge questions for each community.) Again, responses were scored 1 if correct and 0 if incorrect or if no response was recorded. The knowledge questions varied significantly for each of the three newspapers and for residents of different school districts. Respondents in Branson were given seven knowledge questions, as were those who lived in outlying school districts where board races were not covered or who were unaware of the school district they live in. Respondents in St. Joseph and Sikeston who could name their school district received eight questions. Knowledge scores were calculated by the number of correct answers from 0-8 or from 0-7. Although the disparities in the knowledge questions made comparisons of respondent knowledge of government and elections between the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys difficult, there should be something to learn.

Which sources of information about municipal elections respondents find most useful.

Survey participants were asked to rate the value of their local print newspaper, the newspaper's website, political forums or debates, conversations with other people, political ads in the newspaper, direct mail from candidates or campaigns, social media, and candidates' websites. The rankings were made on a scale of 1 to 4, with 4 being "excellent" and 1 being "very poor." Respondents also were asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being "strongly agree" and 1 "strongly disagree," how much they agreed with statements such as "The print edition of the

local newspaper is a valuable source of information about local elections,” or “Reports on local newspaper websites or other digital platforms are valuable sources of information about municipal elections.” A value score for respondents’ rating of the local newspaper and its website was calculated by multiplying the numeric responses to the corresponding questions.

Which types of information about municipal elections respondents find most important.

Participants were asked in both surveys to rank on a scale of 1 to 5 – with 1 being “not at all helpful” and 5 being “very helpful” – reporting on local ballot issues and tax increases, information about candidates’ stances on community issues, reporting that explored the accuracy of candidates’ statements, reporting that explored the quality or feasibility of candidates’ proposed solutions to community challenges, and literacy information about items on the ballot and how to participate in the election.

Which news formats respondents find most useful in helping them make decisions about how and whether to vote in a local election. Participants were asked to rank on a scale of 1 to 4 – with 1 being “not at all helpful” and 4 being “very helpful,” how they felt about in-depth news stories about community issues in the election, question-and-answer pieces with candidates’ verbatim responses, charts or grids comparing candidates’ stances on major issues, live or recorded video of candidate forums or debates, databases of candidates’ or committees’ campaign fundraising, online video or audio interviews with candidates, and photographs of candidates.

Data from both surveys were analyzed using Microsoft Excel sorting, filtering and pivot table functions. Correlation and regression analyses were completed using SPSS.

RESULTS

Changes in coverage

Research Question 1 asked whether the staffs of smaller newspapers could significantly boost the quantity and quality of their local election coverage without additional reporting resources, so long as they were persuaded to treat municipal elections as a priority. In terms of quantity, the answer to RQ1 was yes, based on a simple comparison between the number of election-related stories each of the newspapers published during the 2013 and 2014 municipal campaign seasons.

There was a substantial increase in the volume of election coverage at all three newspapers, particularly the St. Joseph News-Press. From Jan. 1, 2013, up until Election Day on April 5, 2013, the News-Press offered a total of 17 stories or reports related to the municipal election. In 2014, the paper offered 74 election-related stories from Jan. 1 to Election Day on April 8, more than four times that of the previous year. Much of that disparity might be explained by the fact that there was very little of note on the St. Joseph/Buchanan County 2013 municipal election ballot, while the 2014 ballot featured races for several city council positions and for school boards, as well as a proposed ban on indoor smoking in St. Joseph. The 2014 numbers, however, also compare favorably to 2010, the last year in which St. Joseph held a city council election. In that year, the News-Press offered 34 election-related stories between Jan. 1 and Election Day, 40 fewer than it did in 2014.

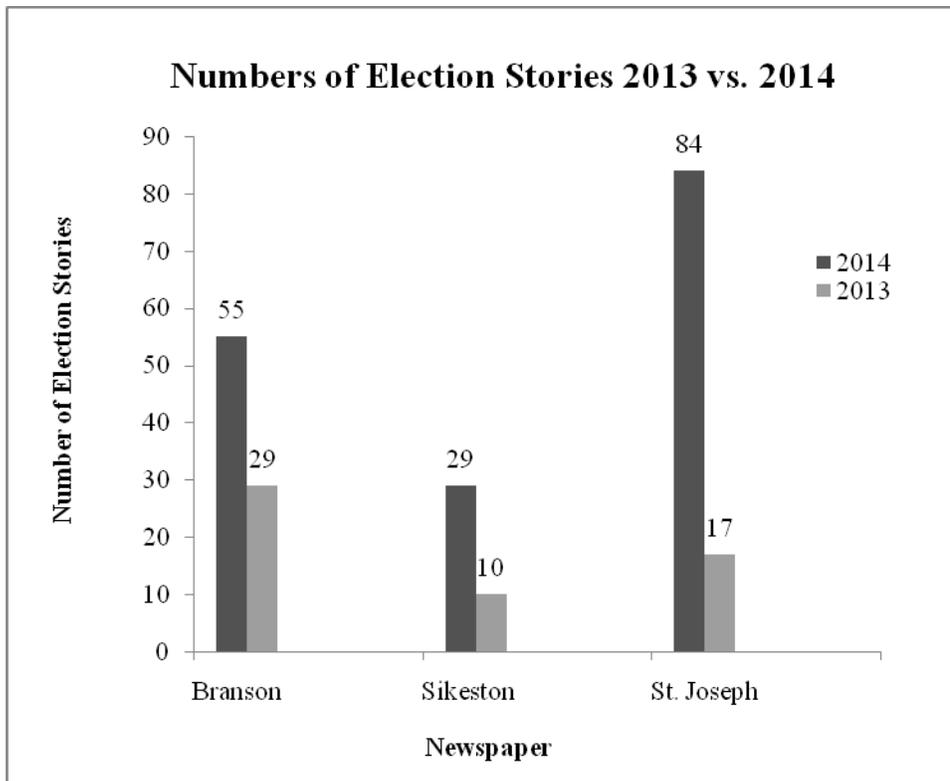
The quantity of election coverage also increased at the Branson Tri-Lakes News and the Sikeston Standard-Democrat. In 2013, the Branson paper published 29 stories or reports related to the municipal election between Jan. 1 and Election Day. That number rose to 47 in 2014. The Sikeston paper in 2013 offered 10 election-related stories during the same period, compared with

23 in 2014. In Branson, both years' ballots featured tax issues as well as town council and school board races. In Sikeston, the school district's request for a \$32.3 million bond issue might have driven the volume of coverage up significantly, although a tax on Internet sales did appear on the 2013 ballot. Stories about election results were excluded from these counts, except for reporting on the outcome of the March city council primary in St. Joseph. See Figure 1, which charts the increases in election coverage.

Although traditional narrative news reports dominated all three newspapers' coverage, there were some changes in the formats they used to convey information about races and issues on the municipal election ballot.

Both the St. Joseph News-Press and the Sikeston Standard-Democrat added video interviews to their online election coverage. On its website, the St. Joseph paper published television-style video interviews with city council candidates, produced in collaboration with the jointly owned television station Fox 26 KNPB. It also published a small database of campaign contributions to the committees campaigning for and against the smoking ban, and in the days before the election it published PDF charts that allowed readers to make side-by-side comparisons of candidates' stances on major issues in the school board and city council campaigns. The publisher of the Sikeston paper conducted video interviews with school board members and campaign leaders promoting the school bond issue and published them on its website and its Facebook page. A member of the Sikeston newspaper staff also published an editorial opposing the bond issue.

Figure 1. Numbers of municipal election stories in newspapers studied.



Whether the quality of election coverage at each newspaper improved is a more subjective matter when examined through the lens of the researchers. Although the volume of election coverage increased dramatically at each newspaper – and there were some attempts to experiment with new formats – all in all there continued to be a heavy reliance on official and campaign sources in the newspapers’ coverage of local ballot issues. Coverage of races for political office relied largely on traditional question-and-answer pieces, narrative stories and summaries of biographical information. The St. Joseph paper did a considerable amount of reporting on campaign and candidate forums. There were no attempts to provide context or to check the accuracy or feasibility of statements and positions that candidates offered in interviews or in public forums.

Regarding ballot issues – including a new tax for 911 services in Branson, the Sikeston school district bond issue and the smoking ban in St. Joseph – nearly all the sources interviewed were either public officials or members of campaign committees organized either for or against the measures. See Tables 2 and 3 for breakdowns of the methods/formats the newspapers incorporated in their election coverage and the types of content they provided, both in 2013 and in 2014.

Quality of Coverage as Rated by Respondents

Hypothesis 1 predicted that changes in the quantity and quality of local election coverage at the participating newspapers would resonate with readers, as measured by the quality ratings survey respondents gave their respective community newspapers as sources of that election news in 2013 and 2014. H1 is not supported. In fact, in every case respondents in the 2014 Time 2 survey gave lower average value ratings to the print and online editions of their newspapers as sources of local election news than did respondents in the Time 1 2013 survey. Even respondents who participated in both surveys rated their newspapers' print and web editions lower in 2014 than in 2013, with the exception of St. Joseph, where readers rated the print edition of the News-Press the same in both years. See Table 3 for the distribution of scores. In the 2014 survey, however, there was a strong positive correlation between the amount of attention respondents reported paying to election news in the print edition of their paper and the perceived value of the print newspaper as a source of local election news ($r = .36, p < .01$), and a strong positive correlation between the amount of attention respondents reported paying to election news on their paper's website and the perceived value of the website as a source of election news ($r = .40, p < .01$).

Table 1: Methods/formats of newspapers' election coverage.

METHODS/FORMATS OF ELECTION COVERAGE				
	Branson Tri- Lakes News	Sikeston Standard- Democrat	St. Joseph News- Press	Total
Brief				
2013	5	1	3	9
2014	1	4	9	14
Narrative				
2013	0	10	14	24
2014	13	15	48	76
Q&A				
2013	0	1	0	1
2014	10	1	15	26
Profiles				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	0	0
Biographical				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	8	1	0	9
Charts/grids				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	3	3
Audio interviews				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	0	0
Video				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	2	10	12
Online live chats				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	0	0
Documentary photos				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	0	0
Public records				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	1	0	1	2
Graphic/map				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	1	0	1	2

Table 2: Content of newspapers' election coverage.

CONTENT OF ELECTION COVERAGE				
	Branson Tri-Lakes News	Sikeston Standard- Democrat	St. Joseph News- Press	Total
Ballot issues				
2013	5	5	12	22
2014	9	12	24	45
Candidate stances				
2013	11	1	1	13
2014	10	1	32	11
Candidate forums				
2013	0	0	1	1
2014	1	0	7	8
Candidate accuracy				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	0	0	0	0
Exploring stances				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	1	0	0	1
Literacy				
2013	24	10	7	41
2014	14	12	20	46
Campaign finance				
2013	0	0	0	0
2014	2	0	3	5
Campaign strategy				
2013	3	0	0	3
2014	1	0	1	2
Opinion				
2013	0	0	2	2
2014	2	5	4	11

The correlation between attention to print election news and the value of print as a source was positive in the 2013 survey ($r = .12, p < .01$), and there was also a strong positive relationship in between attention to election reporting on a newspaper's website and the perceived value of the site as a source ($r = .16, p < .01$).

Table 3: Content of newspapers' election coverage.

**RATINGS OF PRINT AND ONLINE NEWSPAPERS
AS SOURCES OF LOCAL ELECTION NEWS**

Year	Branson Tri-Lakes News		Sikeston Standard-Democrat		St. Joseph News Press	
	Print Value*	Web Value**	Print Value	Web Value	Print Value	Web Value
2013	15.10	15.96	16.66	16.99	16.27	15.36
2014	11.80	9.54	15.42	11.05	15.42	10.73

Print value scores were calculated by multiplying numeric responses (on a scale of 1 to 5) to the statement "Local newspaper reports are a valuable source of information about local elections" by ratings (on a scale of 1 to 5) of the paper as a source of election news. Web value scores were calculated by multiplying numeric responses (on a scale of 1 to 5) to the statement "Reports on local newspaper websites are a valuable source of information about local elections" by ratings (on a scale of 1 to 5) of the paper's website as a source of election news.

Attention to Election News and Importance of Voting

Hypothesis 2 predicted there would be a positive correlation between respondents' attention to local election news in the print and online editions of their newspaper and the reported importance of voting in municipal elections. In the 2013 survey, there was a strong correlation between print attention and the importance of voting ($r = .41, p < .01$) and between web attention and the importance of voting ($r = .51, p < .01$). In the 2014 survey, the reported importance of voting in municipal elections was positively correlated to respondent's attention to local election news for the print ($r = .46, p < .01$) and for the web ($r = .30, p < .01$). Therefore, H2 was supported.

Attention to Election News and Knowledge of Government/Elections

Hypothesis 3 predicted that those who report higher levels of newspaper readership and attention to local election news in print and online would demonstrate more knowledge of issues and races on their local election ballot, as measured by knowledge questions that were administered in both the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys. This hypothesis was tested by curvilinear

regression. In 2013, there was no significant relationship between attention to election news and knowledge ($p > .2$). In the 2014 survey, knowledge was positively predicted by attention to print news ($B = .07, p < .01$) and attention to online news ($B = .11, p < .01$). Thus H3 was partially supported.

Although it was the original intent of this research to compare respondents' performance on knowledge questions in the Time 1 and Time 2 surveys – as a test of whether better election reporting resulted in higher levels of election-related knowledge – such comparisons are ill-advised, if not impossible, because of vast differences in the knowledge questions in each survey and the significant difference in lag time between the municipal election seasons of 2013 and 2014 and the times the surveys were administered. It's worth noting, however, that participants overall did not fare particularly well on either set of knowledge questions.

In the 2013 survey, 65 percent of respondents were able to correctly say whether their city or town is governed by a city council, a board of aldermen or a board of trustees, but only 36.3 percent could say how long the term of office for a council or board seat was. A mere 16 percent were able to correctly answer the question of how long a term on their local school board lasts. Respondents on average answered 1.02 of the three questions correctly. A total of 399 respondents across the three readership areas got none of the answers correct.

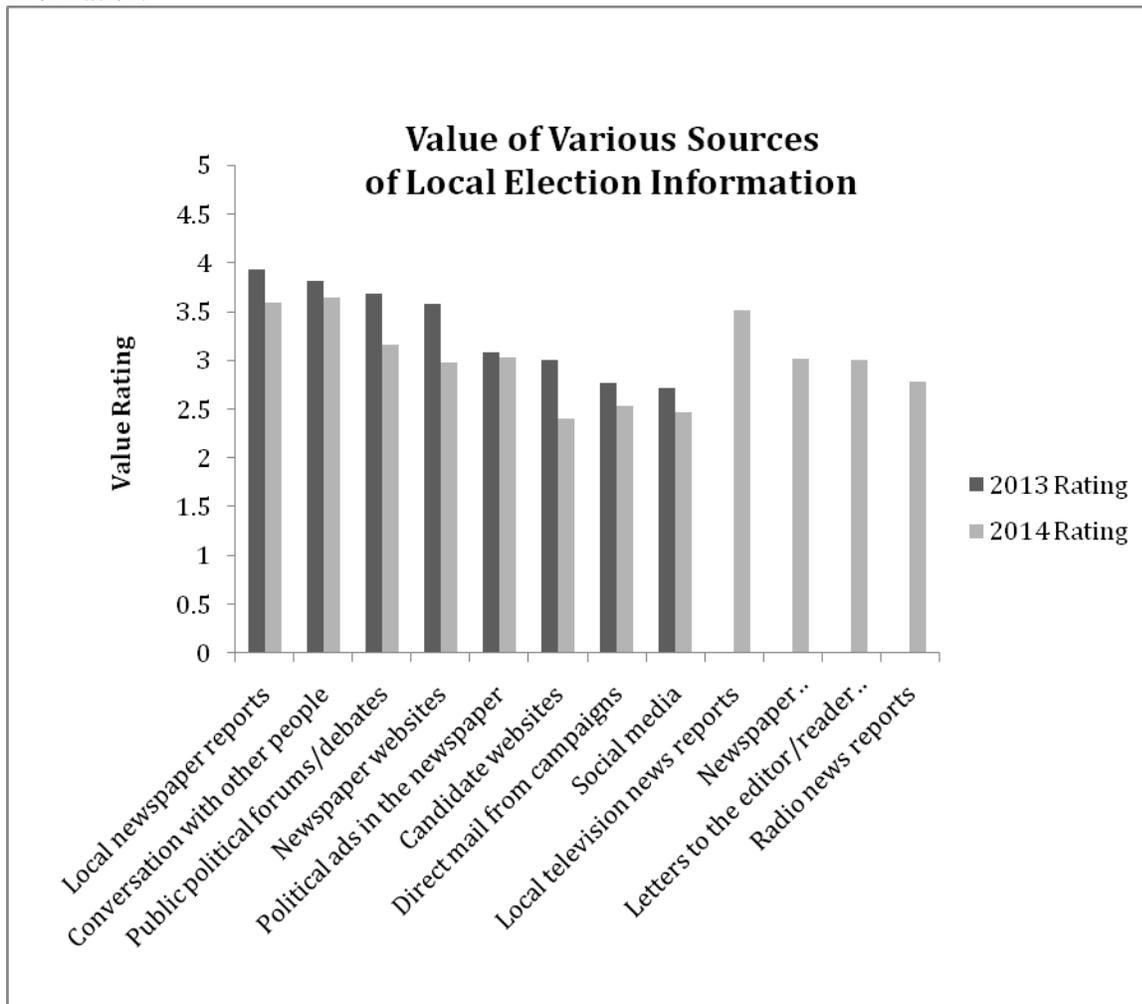
Respondents overall did poorly on the knowledge questions in the 2014 survey as well. In Branson, where seven knowledge questions were asked, respondents answered an average of 1.64 correctly. In Sikeston and St. Joseph, where eight knowledge questions were asked (except in those cases where the respondent could not name the school district he or she lives in), respondents answered an average of 2.84 and 3.03 correctly, respectively.

Preferences for Sources, Types and Formats of Local Election News

Research Questions 2, 3 and 4 sought to learn what sources of information about local elections respondents would report are most valuable, what types of information they find most important and what formats of election journalism they believe are most useful, respectively.

Perhaps the most striking result is in regard to RQ2. Respondents in the 2013 survey rated print editions of the local newspaper as the most valuable source of information on municipal elections, followed closely by conversations with other people. In the 2014 survey, the reverse was true. That is, respondents rated conversations with others as slightly more valuable than print election news. The ranking order for the remaining sources remained unchanged, although ratings declined from 2013 to 2014 for every source respondents were asked to consider. Only the Time 2 survey inquired about the value of television and radio reports about the election or about newspaper editorials/endorsements and letters to the editor and reader comments. See Figure 2 for a summary of the source ratings.

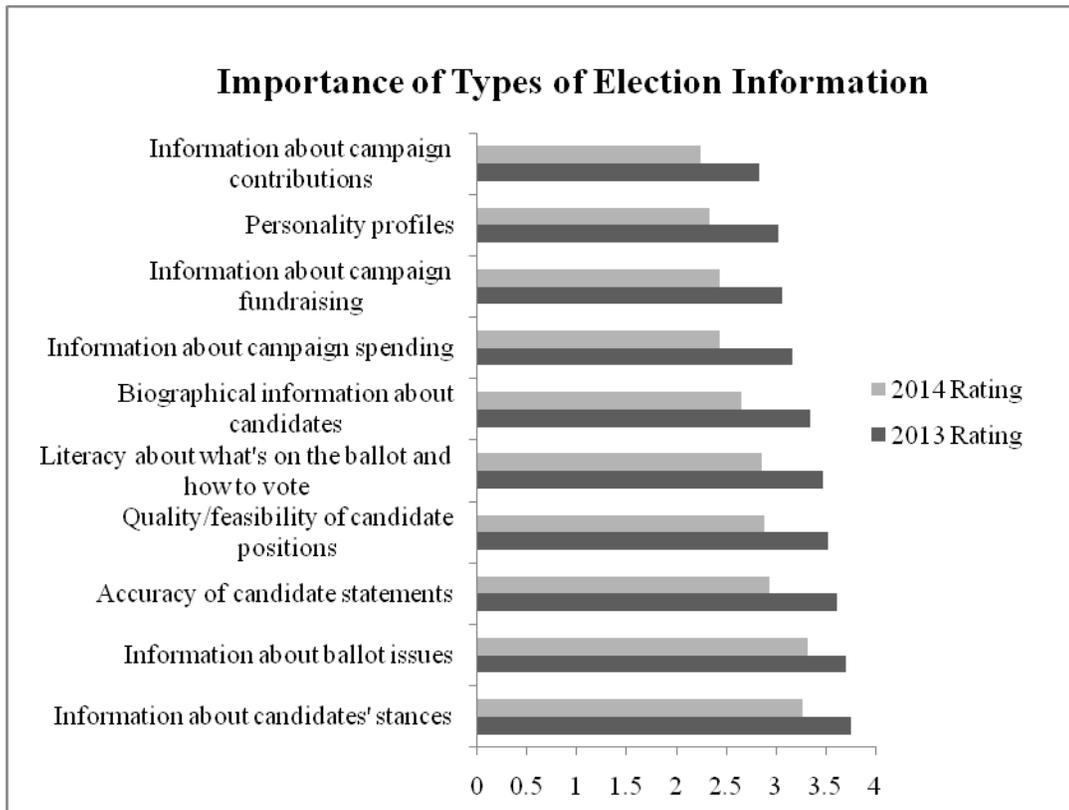
Figure 2. Value of various sources of local election information.



Respondents were asked to indicate how strongly they agreed with a statement that each of these was a valuable source of information about municipal elections. Responses were coded on a 5-point scale, from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree."

RQ3 was intended to gauge which types of election news respondents deemed most important. The results between the 2013 and 2014 surveys were remarkably consistent in terms of the order of importance people placed on various types of election news. Information about candidates’ stances on community issues and reporting on ballot issues were rated most important in both years, followed by reporting that explores the accuracy of candidates’ statements and the quality and feasibility of their statements. Again, though, every type of information was rated less important in 2014 than in 2013.

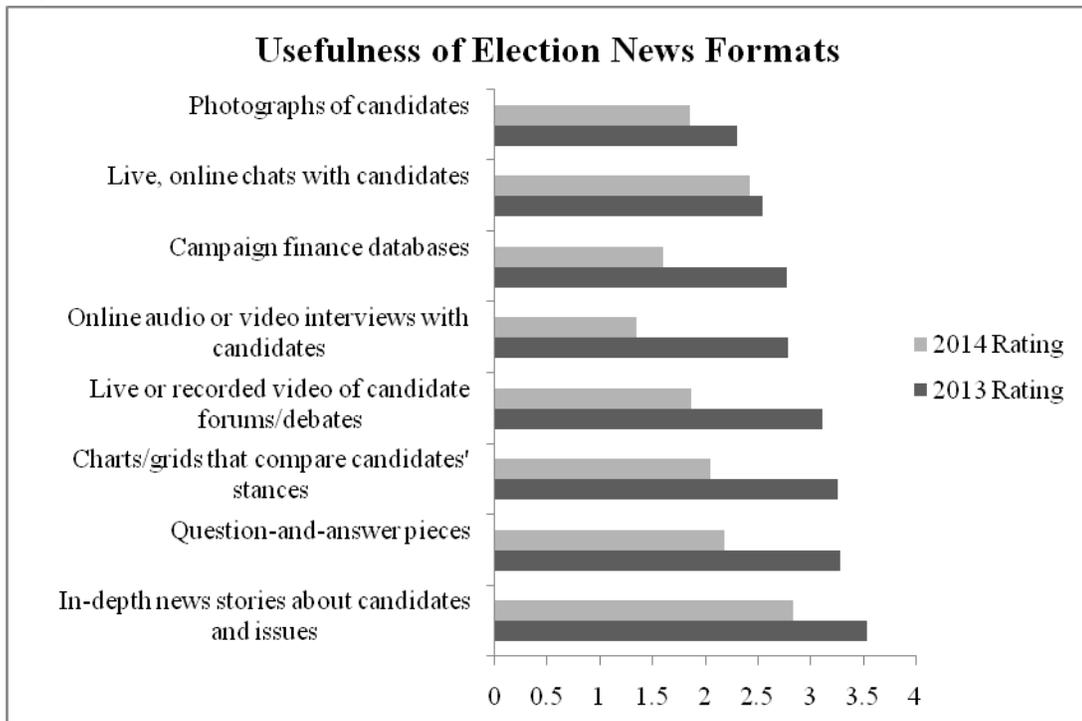
Figure 3. Importance of various types of election news.



Responses were coded on a 4-point scale, from (1) "not important at all," (2) "somewhat unimportant," (3) "somewhat important," and (4) "very important."

RQ4 sought to determine which formats of election coverage respondents find most useful. Again, the results were remarkably consistent from one year to the next, with respondents indicating that traditional in-depth news stories about candidates and issues are most useful and that photographs of candidates are least useful. The theme of lower ratings overall in 2014 carries as well. In every instance, respondents to the 2014 survey rated the usefulness of various formats of election news lower – sometimes much lower – in 2014 than in 2013. See Figure 4 for an illustration of the results.

Figure 4. Usefulness of various formats of election news.



Responses were coded on a 4-point scale, from (1) "not at all helpful," (2) "somewhat unhelpful," (3) "somewhat helpful," and (4) "very helpful."

REMARKS

The results of this multifaceted survey are in many ways encouraging but also in many ways difficult to explain. Clearly, the small community newspapers that participated in the project demonstrated that they were able to significantly boost at least the quantity of their coverage of municipal elections, without making substantial additions to their newsroom staffs. The quality of their 2014 coverage, too, would be considered by most industry observers to be significantly improved, but responses to our Time 1 and Time 2 surveys don't reflect that residents of the newspapers readership areas feel the same.

There is room for these newspapers, like others serving small towns across America, to continue improving their coverage of local campaigns and ballot issues. Efforts to get beyond official sources and campaign voices and to truly engage the public in setting the agenda for an

election might go a long way toward making the public feel more appreciation for the content. Journalists can work harder to bring context to the community issues that often are most fervently debated during campaigns seasons. If a city council candidate, for example, suggests at a public forum that the street and sidewalk needs of Ward 2 are greater than any other ward in the city, but that the city is spending the least on streets and sidewalks there, a reporter ought to test that assertion and report whether it's true. If a school board candidate says that teacher salaries in her district are lower than any comparable district in the state, and that teachers are leaving as a result, a reporter can and ought to check that out. If a village trustee candidate says the city should hire a third police officer, a reporter can ask questions about how much that would cost and where the money would come from.

Survey respondents were invited to leave open comments. Several of them reflect the sentiment that small newspapers can try harder. One in the 2014 survey gave the local newspaper a 1, or poor score, for its value as a source of local election news.

“Local media no longer does investigative or in-depth pieces on important issues. The extreme lack of depth is disturbing and should be explored by media experts. People are not being served,” the respondent said.

“True investigative reporting is sorely lacking,” said another. “Local news seems content to report what is on the surface.”

Small community newspapers, generally speaking, also could make better use of their websites. Much of the content, including that pertaining to elections, is identical to what is published in the print edition. But newspapers can use the web to engage audiences on the issues they think are most important in an election. They can publish audio or video interviews with candidates, as one of the newspapers in this study did. They can livestream public forums, and

even publish podcasts of them. They can post PDFs of campaign finance reports and even create databases that make them easy for a reader to search. They can aggregate their election coverage on a single web page to make it easier to navigate, even for those who don't pay attention until a few days before the vote. Again, one of our newspapers did that.

Smaller newspapers also could make better use of documentary photography and experiment with personality profiles of candidates. There wasn't a single instance in this study of any of the three newspapers publishing documentary photographs of candidates on the campaign or in their work or family life. This is significant because open comments in our survey reflected much of the same cynicism about local politics that abounds regarding state and federal campaigns. Politicians are thieves and/or liars who are in the game for personal gain. They'll say and do anything to get elected. Honest personality profiles that delve into the backgrounds of candidates, that explore their personal and work lives, that illustrate their character through thoughtful photography, can portray politicians as more human – and perhaps help them regain public trust.

This experiment failed to move the needle on the quality ratings residents and readers gave their newspapers for local election coverage from 2013 to 2014, despite vast improvements to the volume of coverage in all three communities. That's disappointing but perhaps not surprising when we see how much farther community journalists can go. One grain of good news, however, is that, generally, the more attention respondents reported paying to their newspapers and to local election news, the higher value ratings they tended to give those reports.

This study did find a moderate positive correlation between the importance people place on municipal elections and the amount of attention they pay to reports about them in the local newspaper. One has to wonder, though, whether folks might over-report their interest in voting

on local political races and ballot issues. In both surveys, respondents almost certainly over-reported whether they voted in the April election. Fully 70 percent of 2013 respondents said that they did in 2014, and a nearly identical 69.3 percent said they did so in 2014. In reality, voter turnout in the three towns in the April 2013 and 2014 elections ranged from 11 percent to 15 percent. The exception was in St. Joseph's Buchanan County, where voter turnout in 2014 hit 32 percent, perhaps because a smoking ban appeared on the ballot. Over-reporting of voting behavior is not uncommon (Leshner and Thorson, 2000), so it's possible that people also over-report the perceived importance of voting in municipal elections. In the 2013 survey, 82 percent of respondents said local voting was either "important" or "very important" to them personally. That number dropped to 65 percent in 2014 but remained quite high compared with actual voter turnout.

The positive correlation between attention to newspaper election journalism and performance on what essentially were quizzes about municipal elections is heartening: We can say that people who read the paper in print or online generally do better than others on knowledge questions. Still, the overall low knowledge scores are a concern, both for the public and for this research. In hindsight, we find flaws in the design of the Time 1 survey. And although the Time 2 survey was much better, there was too long a lag time between the election and the time the survey was administered. Future surveys should be conducted either immediately after the election or even during the campaign so that respondents are relying less on their memory.

Regarding people's preferences for the sources, types and formats of local election news, it's clear that newspapers remain among the favorite sources. That's a good thing, but conversation with other people is right there alongside. That's right in line with Becker and

Dunwoody's assertion (1982) more than 20 years ago that interpersonal communication might be the most powerful influence over political behavior and attitudes at the local level. Newspapers, then, need to be more aggressive about finding ways to become part of that conversation. As one 2014 respondent put it:

“News travels faster by word of mouth here. Because of that, we have a lot of personal interaction with people. So, when you see something, like an editorial, I want to see what the people at the newspaper are coming up with, to see (that) what I heard is what they've heard. ... It's good to see that what you heard in the grapevine is accurate.”

Respondents' ratings of the types and formats of election news produced few surprises. We learn that in-depth news stories about races for school boards, city councils and ballot issues are important to them, but we also find that they crave journalism that explores in more depth the quality and feasibility of candidates' stances on community issues. That's something they're not getting in many small towns. One respondent to the 2014 survey lamented the lack of election news. “We really don't get a lot of information regarding candidates in this area,” he or she said. “...I do live in a small, rinky-dink town, so I guess I have to accept that we just won't get much info around here.”

Similarly, our surveys asked people to rate how helpful they find some formats of news to be – e.g., audio and video interviews, personality profiles, documentary photographs, live or recorded video of campaign forums – even though they don't receive that sort of election information from their newspaper.

Better avenues for tapping into public sentiment about election journalism might exist. Focus groups could work better than surveys by allowing people to fully explain their preferences, and what they like and dislike about their newspapers' reporting on elections. And while there's no real way to know who's reading what in print, web analytics can tell researchers

a lot about whether people actually consume the types and formats of news they say they want. This study has produced a wealth of data and insight into how people perceive local elections and their community newspaper's reporting on them. In that sense, it's a valuable addition to the literature. It's a good step, but much work remains to be done.

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APPENDIX 1

ANSWERS TO KNOWLEDGE QUESTIONS IN RJI ELECTION SURVEY

Branson

1. What is the name of the district that sought an extension of the Branson-area tourism tax?

- The Branson-Area Economic Development District
- The Branson/Lakes Area Tourism Community Enhancement District
- The Taney County Tourism Promotion District
- The Branson/Indian Point Tourism District
- Not sure/Don't know

2. How much is the tourism sales tax that voters approved on April 8?

- 1 cent
- 1.5 cents
- One-half cent
- One-quarter cent
- Not sure/Don't know

3. For how long was the tourism tax extended?

- 5 years
- 10 years
- 15 years
- 20 years
- Not sure/Don't know

4. Approximately how much money is the tourism sales tax expected to generate each year?

- \$2 million
- \$5 million
- \$7 million
- \$11 million
- Not sure/Don't know

5. Who chaired the campaign promoting approval of the tourism sales tax?

- Jamie Rouch
- Ross Summers
- Leah Chandler
- Jim Barber
- Not sure/Don't know

For those who live in the Branson R-IV School District

6. How many seats were available on the Branson R-IV school board this election?

- One
- Two
- Three

Four
Not sure/Don't know

7. Who among the following was a candidate for the Branson R-IV school board?

Jeff Smethers
Dalton Howard
Lydia Jones
Barbara Brown
Not sure/Don't know

For those who live in the Hollister R-V School District

6. How many seats were available on the Hollister R-V school board this election?

One
Two
 Three
Four
Not sure/Don't know

7. Who among the following was a candidate for the Hollister R-V school board?

Lisa Westfall
Dalton Howard
Lydia Jones
Barbara Brown
Not sure/Don't know

For those who live in the Forsyth R-III School District

6. How many seats were available on the Forsyth R-III school board this election?

One
Two
 Three
Four
Not sure/Don't know

7. Who among the following was a candidate for the Forsyth R-III school board?

Bill Stuart
Dalton Howard
Lydia Jones
Barbara Brown
Not sure/Don't know

For those who live in the Reeds Spring R-IV School District

6. How many seats were available on the Reeds Spring R-IV school board this year?

One

Two

Three

Four

Not sure/Don't know

7. There was no election for the Reeds Spring R-IV school board this year. Why?

Because no candidates filed

Because there were just as many candidates as there were seats available

Because Reeds Spring holds school board elections only once every two years

Because Reeds Spring holds school board elections only once every three years

Not sure/Don't know

Sikeston

1. John Graham and Gerald Settles ran for Sikeston City Council in which ward?

Ward 1

Ward 2

Ward 3

Ward 4

Not sure/Don't know

2. Which of the Sikeston City Council candidates worked 28 years for Eli Lilly & Co. and for Dow Chemical before retiring?

John Graham

Gerald Settles

Not sure/Don't know

3. The Sikeston R-6 school district on the April 8 ballot sought a bond issue worth how much money?

\$15.6 million

\$19.7 million

\$23.4 million

\$32.3 million

Not sure/Don't know

4. The bond issue proposed building two new schools: one for first- and second-graders, and one for third- and fourth-graders. How many students would each of those schools have accommodated?

400

500

600

800

Not sure/Don't know

5. Which of the following was NOT included in plans for the new elementary schools?

A greenhouse powered by solar and wind energy

A full-service kitchen and cafeteria

Separate rooms for art and music

A safe room for protection from tornados

Not sure/Don't know

6. What did the bond issue propose adding to the school district's Kindergarten Center?

New playground equipment

A multipurpose room

A small auditorium for assemblies and parent events

A craft room

Not sure/Don't know

7. What sorts of classes were intended to be held in the new C Building at Sikeston High School?

Industrial arts and vocational-technical courses

Biology, chemistry and other science courses

English, history and journalism courses

Physical education courses

Not sure/Don't know

8. Who among the following was a candidate for mayor of Miner?

Frank Tatum

Janet Williams

Lydia Jones

Robert Green

St. Joseph

1. In what percentage of rooms are hotels and motels required to prohibit smoking under the smoking-ban ordinance approved by voters on April 8?

20 percent

50 percent

75 percent
x 90 percent
Not sure/Don't know

2. What was the name of the primary organized group that lobbied in favor of the smoking ban?

St. Joe Citizens for Clean, Healthy Air
x Citizens for Smoke-Free St. Joe
Citizens for Fairness in Missouri
Committee to Snuff Out Public Smoking
Not sure/Don't know

3. Joyce Starr and Ellis Cross were candidates for which district seat on the St. Joseph City Council?

District I
x District II
District III
District IV
District V
Not sure/Don't know

4. Barbara LaBass and Mary Atteberry were candidates for which district seat on the St. Joseph City Council?

District I
District II
District III
District IV
x District V
Not sure/Don't know

5. Which of the following candidates for an at-large seat on the St. Joseph City Council said the city can find enough money in its existing budget to pay for street maintenance needs?

Byron Myers Sr.
Donna Jean Boyer
Jeff Penland
xKenneth Reeder
Not sure/Don't know

6. Which of the following candidates for an at-large seat on the St. Joseph City Council said the city should take down red-light cameras and instead use the public safety tax to step up police enforcement of traffic laws?

Jeff Penland
x Ken Beck
Donna Jean Boyer

Byron Myers Sr.
Not sure/Don't know

7. Which of the following candidates for an at-large seat on the St. Joseph City Council proposed a program to pay a small wage to homeless men and women who help clean up the city?

Kenneth Reeder
Ken Beck
x Kent "Spanky" O'Dell
Donna Jean Boyer
Not sure/Don't know

For those in the St. Joseph School District

8. Who among the following was a candidate for the St. Joseph school board?

x Lori Prussman
Dalton Howard
Lydia Jones
Barbara Brown
Not sure/Don't know

For those in the Savannah R-III School District

8. Who among the following was a candidate for the Savannah R-III school board?

x Jim Vega
Dalton Howard
Lydia Jones
Barbara Brown
Not sure/Don't know

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