

Life After Newspapers: Local Political Information On the Web

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Abstract

Scholars and pundits have widely discussed the decline of print journalism, but there has been very little empirical research focused on examining online alternatives. This article utilizes a unique sample of online local political content related to the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign to address this empirical void. A content analysis of this dataset explores the sources of online local political information (LPI), its qualities, and how much of it is original material. New media sources of LPI may be far from maturity, but this article finds that they do exist and are a viable resource for citizens.

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Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter.” As local newspapers wither and fail in the modern media environment, a situation that Jefferson was loathe to imagine is rapidly becoming our reality. The decline of newspapers raises an array of compelling questions about the future of democracy in America’s communities. How will citizens learn about local politics? Who will produce local political information (LPI)? Who will assume the watchdog role that the press has long fulfilled? Various observers suggest that new media technologies are key to answering these questions via user-generated content (Rosen, 2008), peer-to-peer collaboration (Benkler, 2006), or perhaps a Web 2.0 interface (Jarvis, 2005). Yet, the optimistic tenor of these perspectives is matched by the pessimistic tone struck by scholars like Starr (2009) and Shirky (2009) who chronicle the downfall of newspapers and see little hope online. In general, while opinions on this topic are abundant, very little empirical work examining the shift to an online future exists.

This article systematically assesses the online LPI related to the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign. Using automated Google queries as a starting point, the breadth of online local political content – including, but extending beyond the pages available from newspaper websites – is collected into a dataset used to shed light upon three particular issues. What are the sources of the LPI that is available online? What are the content and structural features of this LPI? And, how much of this LPI is original and how much is “shovelware” – offline content imported without alteration onto the web? This article complements prognostications about the future of local news made by other scholars and

pundits in that it provides an evidence-based reading of the LPI presently available online. This piece does not contain predictions about the future, but it may be useful in interpreting such predictions and even in constructing new forecasts. More importantly, it may help to ensure the strength and vibrance of local democracies by guiding efforts to provide citizens with necessary LPI in the digital age.

In the next section, a brief literature review defines and examines the significance of political information and summarizes previous studies of the local political content provided by mass media outlets. Drawing upon this literature, the three research questions that guide the analyses are then stated. Following this, the data and methods employed to address these research questions are detailed. The contours of the content analysis are modeled upon prior research but the approach to collecting the data and constructing the sample is unique. In order, the article continues with sections for the findings, discussion, and conclusion.

Literature Review

Political Information & its Importance

Like the study of agenda-setting or persuasion, research into the role that political information plays in the functioning of democracy is an enduring thread of communication scholarship (Bennett & Entman, 2001). This research begins with the notion that information is necessary grist for effective democracy (Mill, 1859; Eveland et al., 2005; Craig et al., 2005). Though there are conflicting perspectives of precisely how much information citizens need or require (Page & Shapiro, 1992; Sniderman et al., 1991; Converse, 1964; Schudson, 1998), there is “clear evidence that the amount of information one possesses shapes attitudes and behaviors, including such things as

participation, voting behavior, tolerance, and information processing strategies” (Druckman, 2005, p. 517).

This article is concerned with two basic kinds of political information – both of which are important cogs in the democratic process. First, simple factual data about election times, registration deadlines, and campaign events is called mobilizing information (MI) and is vital in alerting and organizing the electorate in advance of the public undertakings of democracy (Lemert, 1981). The second kind of political information details the substance of political affairs: what actions are taken by governmental bodies; what positions and characteristics representatives and candidates have; and how popular various ideas, officials, and candidates are. Within this category, there is a split between information that describes the strategic aspect of politics (also known as the ‘horse-race’) and issue-centric information (Iyengar, 1991; Cappella & Jamieson, 1997).

Despite widespread interest in studying the role of mass-mediated political information in the context of national politics, research of LPI is sparse and incomplete. Citizens can learn about local political affairs through direct experience and interpersonal interactions, but patterns of local political activity confirm that mass media institutions have long been critical components of the local landscape (Verba & Nie, 1972). And, though little empirical research directly examines the role between LPI consumption and local political participation, a smattering suggests that both mobilizing and substantive political information provided by mass media are necessary components of healthy community democracies (McLeod et al., 1999; Scheufele et al., 2002). Scholarly knowledge of LPI itself, however, is limited to a small number of dated content analyses

that do not account for changes in the mass media environment.

Media & Local Political Information

Examinations of the LPI content of local news are typically limited to electoral periods and have two primary issues of concern: how much LPI exists and what frame (strategy or issue-driven) is most often employed in it. Studies of local TV news conclude that it is largely composed of stories on national topics or local crime and includes very little coverage of local political topics (Klite et al., 1997; Kaplan et al., 2003; Kaplan et al., 2005; Kiolbassa, 1997; Stevens et al., 2006). Turning to newspapers, several scholars (Kaniss, 1995; Graber, 1984; Grainey et al., 1984) have found that the limited local political campaign coverage that does exist, like national political campaign news, includes only a small amount of issue-focused reporting. The consensus of this body of research is that, even if somewhat wanting, the local political content provided by newspapers is an important part of the democratic landscape that is unmatched by any other media.

Though it is clear that citizens are turning to the web for news, the features of the LPI available on the internet to citizens are murkier. Scholars have begun to consider the audience's move online by studying the online sites of newspapers (Singer, 2001; Hoffman, 2006; Boczkowski & de Santos, 2007). Singer (2001) found that much of the content on newspaper websites is "shovelware" – articles taken from the print edition and formatted for the web without any other change. Along these lines, Hoffman (2006) compared the amount and types of mobilizing information in online and print newspapers and found no significant differences across the platforms. Boczkowski and de Santos (2007) explored the overlap of story topics between major daily newspapers in Argentina

and their online versions. They found that content overlapped between newspapers significantly more in 2004-5 than in 1995 and 2000; that as the course of the day proceeded, coverage on competing online newspaper sites' converged; and that the hard news present at the end of each day online predicted the majority of hard news on the front-page of the next day's paper.

On the whole, this research depicts an online presentation of newspapers that fails to adapt to the new medium: there is very little new about online newspapers. Left unexplored, however, are the other online outlets of LPI. If, as Starr (2009) and others argue, most newspapers are destined to collapse, the question to ask is: Where will LPI come from if and when local newspapers fail? This question has not been empirically explored.

Many versions of the digital future have been imagined. Proponents of blogs see them as "little First Amendment machines" that allow direct, unfettered communication between citizens at a low cost – perfect for LPI (Rosen, 2007). Hyperlocal news sites that aggregate a critical mass of citizens who read and write news of their community are at the heart of another vision (Glaser, 2004). Universities, individuals, and media companies like Gannett have all sought to replicate the success of user-generated content sites like Korea's OhMyNews, but it is unclear whether these ventures will be able to attract an audience and be financially viable (Shaw, 2007; Farhi, 2007). Scholars interested in networks (Wellman & Hampton, 2003; Benkler, 2006) describe many ways that new communication technologies can link citizens together. Instead of passively consuming LPI through news, these citizens each become a node of LPI that can be activated at any time. Aside from these scholarly notions, many real projects – like the website

everyblock.com – use technology to facilitate access to LPI. By early 2009, the Knight Foundation alone had funded 35 such web experiments to provide and disseminate LPI (Miller & Stone, 2009). Yet, in spite of all of this activity, there is a lack of research that depicts what LPI citizens are likely to find when they look for it online.

Research Questions

Given the scarcity of prior research on LPI in general and *online* LPI in particular, research questions, rather than hypotheses, are stated to guide the subsequent analyses. As major local news institutions decline, concern that communities will be without viable suppliers of LPI is increasing. So, the first task of the analysis is to establish a baseline understanding of the sources of LPI online. Doing so will help ground future research of online LPI as well as prognostications about the fate of communities as newspapers across the country fail.

RQ1: What are the sources online that provided LPI relevant to the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign?

The second research question moves beyond the source of online LPI to examine the characteristics of the content contained by the webpages collected for this study. The goal of the analysis here is to describe the kind of LPI that is available from the full variety of online sources. The concern driving this task is that, even if there are alternatives to offline media institutions on the web, they may not provide the kinds of LPI that communities need. Hewing to the guidelines established by previous content analyses of political information, the second research question asks:

RQ2: How prevalent is issue, strategy, and mobilizing information in the online coverage of the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign? And, are there systematic variations in the provisioning of this information across the different sources of LPI?

In the content analysis, pages are also examined for their originality and

interactivity. As Hoffman (2006) and Singer (2001) have shown, much online content is simply copied from offline media. Though these articles specifically compared the online and offline versions of newspapers, they reflect a broader concern about the utility of the internet. If online LPI is largely a derivative of offline media, then it contributes little to a community other than an additional distribution platform. So, it is important to ascertain who is actually producing online LPI to determine whether or not it will be available if newspapers fail.

RQ3: How much of the relevant LPI online is original? Does the proportion of original content vary across the different sources?

Data & Methods

This article directly examines the LPI that was available online about the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral election. Mayoral elections are high-profile, high-stakes events that demand attention. This campaign was for an open seat, fell in an off-year for national elections, and took place as audiences fled local newspapers and TV newscasts. As such, it presented an excellent opportunity to study LPI in a time of transition in the media environment. The election was won in November by former city councilman Michael Nutter who had dramatically surged from behind the favorites (a pair of U.S. Congressmen, Chaka Fattah and Bob Brady) to secure the Democratic nomination in the April primary.

Data

To examine the LPI about the mayoral election that was available online, a series of scripts were written to repeatedly run specific, relevant Google searches and record the results. These searches were executed automatically, every day, for six weeks in advance of both the 2007 Philadelphia primary and general mayoral elections. At set intervals

each day, the program queried Google with three specific search terms: “Philadelphia mayoral campaign,” “Michael Nutter mayor,” and “Bob Brady mayor.” For each search, the first 30 rankings from Google were recorded. Then, at the end of each day, for every search term the modal result for each of the 30 slots was written to a spreadsheet that included the pages’ titles, URLs, brief descriptions, and rankings. In other words, entries for the most common link at position 1 through 30 for each search term, each day was saved in a spreadsheet. Then, after the primary and general elections, each link contained in the spreadsheets was followed and every unique webpage was saved for analysis. In all, a total of 278 webpages were saved and analyzed in this study.¹

This approach yields a dataset that contains a systematic sample of the LPI available online that was relevant to the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign. Google is a familiar resource for most internet users and is, by one measure, responsible for 13.6% of all web traffic (Qiu et al., 2005) and the lion's share of the more than 25% of online newspaper pageviews that come via search engines (Lee, 2007). The top 30 Google results for a given search do not encapsulate the entire universe of information about a topic available online. But, prior research indicates that the impact – in terms of attention and clicks given by users – of a link decreases dramatically from 1 through 10 and is virtually nonexistent below that (Granka et al., 2004). In other words, the first 30 results (or even just the first 10 results) returned by Google account for the vast majority of the pages a user might eventually read after conducting a search. So, analyzing the top 10 and top 30 results from a given search should provide a fair summary of both what citizens searching the web for LPI are *likely* to read and *could* read. As such, this sample moves beyond the pages of online newspapers and provides an opportunity to grasp the

broader diversity of LPI available on the web.

Data that describes the actual size of the audience for LPI online is sparse. In conjunction with this research, though not discussed in detail in this article, an RDD survey of 1000 Philadelphians was conducted in November 2007. Among other questions about their media use and local political habits, respondents were asked how often they used the web to read local news and how often they searched with Google to locate local news. Among all respondents, 50.1% reported that they read local news on the web and 46.4% reported that they used Google to search for local news. To mitigate the tendency of citizens to over-report their news consumption (Prior, 2009), it may be more realistic to assume that only the citizens who claimed that they used the web or Google for local news ‘most days’ or ‘everyday’ actually did so with any real regularity. Applying this filter, 15.3% of respondents reported reading local news on the web and 11.5% Googled for it. Clearly, the size of the audience for LPI online on a day-to-day basis is smaller than the audience for local TV news and major local newspapers. But, citizens are shifting to the internet as a primary news source (Pew, 2008) and the results of this survey suggest that they are looking beyond the websites of newspapers when they seek local news.

Methods

Coding for the content analysis was carried out by the author and four others: two undergraduate and two graduate students. Among the categories of analysis, assessing the two types of substantive LPI required the most attention. *Strategy* content was defined as information that “describes the campaign strategies and the competition between the candidates” and five sub-categories (with specific examples) of qualifying information

were provided: polling data, campaign funding, advertising strategies, electoral strategies, and endorsements.² The presence of strategy content was then calculated on a 0-5 scale for each web page by adding the number of sub-categories that were marked positive in a text. Coding for *issue* content proceeded in a similar – but not directly comparable – fashion. Here, nine relevant issues were identified for coders who were also given the leeway to identify other pertinent issues that appeared. Beyond identifying the presence of an issue in a text, guidelines and examples for what constituted meaningful coverage were provided to the coders. Each text was then coded as having no meaningful issue content (0), a small amount of content (1), or a large amount of content (2); for segments (or stories) in which multiple issues were raised, the final 0-5 code reflects an aggregation of the amount of total issue coverage added together and limited to a maximum score of 5. Dichotomous variables set to 1 if strategy or issue content was present and 0 if not were created by recoding the ordinal variables. Coding of the remaining variables – the presence of mobilizing information, the presence of user comments, and the originality of the online content – was also dictated by guidelines and examples.

For analytic purposes, the results were divided into five categories depending on the source of the page as: candidates or political parties, traditional major local media institutions such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* or the local network TV affiliates (including blog pages connected to these outlets), alternative media outlets like free entertainment weeklies or community newspapers, independent blogs (all blogs not connected to an existing major local media outlet), and online encyclopedias (like Wikipedia) or aggregators (like Outside.In). Intercoder reliability for this step was

assessed by comparing two coders' evaluation of the source of all the results using Krippendorff's α . According to Krippendorff (2004), the ideal level of agreement on his measure is indicated by a score greater than .80, but α 's above .667 can be acceptable. Using this criterion, agreement about the source of the pages for the three search strings was strong: Bob Brady mayor ($\alpha = .97$), Michael Nutter mayor ($\alpha = .89$), and Philadelphia mayoral campaign ($\alpha = .84$).

Intercoder reliability of the remaining variables was checked by comparing a sample of the saved webpages from one search term executed in each of the primary and general election periods. This purposive sampling technique was chosen for the reliability check to give the coders the benefit of contextual knowledge as they coded. This improved the coders' likelihood of correctly identifying content on pages that had been copied from other sources – one of the key dependent variables in this study – because it made it more likely that they would have read the original publication. The α 's for the intercoder reliability range between .71 and .81 – most below the optimal level of .80 but still acceptable by Krippendorff's standards. The coders conferred about the discrepancies and reached a consensus before proceeding to complete the remaining coding accordingly. For the categories discussed below that are not subjective, such as the number of pages, the author's decision was used. The most relevant portion of the codebook is excerpted in Appendix A; the complete codebook with detailed descriptions of all variables, categories, and coding criteria is available upon request.

Findings

This analysis explores the structure and content of the LPI environment online. First, the amount and source of information returned by Google searches about the 2007

Philadelphia mayoral campaign is documented. Then, the kind of information returned by specific searches and from specific sources is detailed. Finally, a pair of structural components of the online information environment are investigated: the originality of the online content and the presence of interactivity as measured through audience comments.

[Table 1 about here]

Table 1 provides a basic overview of the results of five Google searches executed systematically over six-week periods before either the Philadelphia mayoral primary or general elections. In the table, “N” refers to the number of unique pages collected from Google links that were determined to be relevant and included in the analysis. The number of pages included in the sample for each term differs for three reasons. First, there are fewer unique results for the broader search (“Philadelphia mayoral campaign”) than for the candidate specific searches. Additionally, the broader search term returns a lower proportion of relevant results because pages related to past campaign years were spuriously included. Finally, identical search terms generated more unique results during the primary election period than the general election period. (This is likely true for two reasons. First, the general election was not competitive and drew less attention. Second, the primary created an information environment online that grew entrenched and more stable over time.)

Table 1 also documents the source of the results for each search string. Among all results and the top 10 results, source diversity is apparent. Major local news outlets are the most prevalent source of webpages (28% of the total), but independent blog pages are returned almost as often (26% of the total). Candidate, alternative media, and other new media sources are represented at a nearly equal level (each supplied 14-16% of the total).

It is not possible with these data to validate how well this sample represents the true universe of pertinent online webpages. Still, the distribution of search results here suggests that – given a niche topic – sites outside the mainstream media are included by Google.

[Table 2 about here]

Table 2 details the presence of strategy, issue, and mobilizing information in the web pages included in this study. Slightly more than half of all pages include some strategy (53%) or issue-focused (51%) LPI. About 55% of pages hosted by traditional major local media outlets, independent blogs, or online encyclopedia and aggregation sites contained issue information and the proportion of pages from these sites containing strategy information ranged from 56% to 69%. The pages emanating from either a candidate or a party's site – typically the front page of the site – frequently do not have either issue (21%) or strategy (21%) content (though they may have links that lead to such information). On the other hand, results hosted by alternative media outlets are very likely to have strategy (70%) and issue-focus (82%). In the entire sample, mobilizing information is present in 29% of pages. It is consistent across sources, ranging from being present in 24% of pages hosted by alternative media outlets to 36% of those hosted by encyclopedia or aggregator sites. Additionally, MI was more commonly found in the pages returned by the general campaign search (59% of pages before the primary, 49% of pages before the general) than by the candidate-specific searches.

The amount of strategy and issue information contained by the average page differed depending on its source. On a scale from 0-5, pages emanating from alternative media outlets (strategy: 1.30, issue: 2.70) or online encyclopedias and wire services

(strategy: 1.21, issue: 2.03) have more information than those hosted by blogs (strategy: 1.10, issue: 1.32) or the major local media outlets (strategy: 0.88, issue: 1.57). Direct statistical comparison of these results yields some significant differences. For instance, pages hosted by alternative media outlets have significantly more issue (2.70 to 1.57; $t = 2.98$, $p = .01$) and strategy (1.30 to 0.88; $t = 1.97$, $p = .05$) information than those from major local media outlets.³ These differences are intuitive, since the weekly newspapers publish fewer pieces that are longer and more in depth than their daily brethren. On the other hand, some contrasts, like the amount of strategy and issue information in results from blogs (strategy: 1.10, $se = 0.16$; issue: 1.32, $se = 0.19$) and the traditional local news sources (strategy: 0.88, $se = 0.10$; issue: 1.57, $se = 0.20$), do not show significant differences (strategy: $t = 1.17$; issue: $t = 0.89$). This result suggests that blogs do provide worthwhile LPI in comparison to the traditional primary news sources for communities.

Across all content measures, pages that appeared in the top 10 results yielded more information, more frequently than those returned lower in the rankings. The difference in the amount of issue information contained by top 10 pages (1.82) and all pages (1.34) is significant ($t = 1.99$, $p = .05$). The amount of issue and strategy information does vary some across search terms and electoral periods, but only slightly and with few discernible patterns.

[Table 3 about here]

A concern raised by prior researchers (Singer, 2001; Hoffman, 2006) about web content is that it does not differ from already-existing offline content. Table 3 details two structural dimensions of the web page results: whether they are composed of content reprinted from offline sources and whether they allow (and contain) comments. The

amount of original content in the web pages varies dramatically depending on their source. 97% of results stemming from candidates or political parties – generally homepages, press releases, or policy briefs – were primarily original content. Similarly, 75% of pages emanating from independent blogs were coded as primarily original and half of the remaining results were a mixture of original and reprinted content. On the other hand, pages hosted by alternative media outlets in Philadelphia – *Philadelphia Weekly*, the *Northeast Times*, and so on – were reprints of offline content 85% of the time and pages hosted by the major local media outlets were reprints 61% of the time. In all, 58% of the pages located via the Google searches were composed primarily of original content and 35% were replications of offline media offerings. Among pages that appeared in the top 10 of results, 65% contained primarily original content and 24% replicated offline content, and the remainder were a mixture.

An important difference between online and offline content is the potential for interactivity that the internet holds. In the most simple form, this interactivity is embodied by the ability that members of the audience have to comment upon a webpage and converse with each other on it. Results from blogs – which almost by definition include comments – in this sample almost always allowed comments (94%) and 42% of such results actually contained comments left by readers (see Table 3). Pages emanating from all kinds of old media outlets and the candidates offered the option of commenting 30-40% of the time and 12-13% of pages did include comments. In all, 46% of all results afforded readers the ability to comment and 18% of pages had comments. These figures depict an interactive dimension available on the internet and, paired with the large amount of original content online, suggests that there is something quantifiably *new*

about new media.

Discussion

The findings in this paper illustrate three facets of the online LPI environment. First, information related to the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign was available from an array of websites including old media outlets and new media startups (RQ1). Second, the characteristics of this LPI were fairly consistent across sources (RQ2). In other words, a citizen could have relied on either independent blogs or the *Inquirer* website and would have received comparable issue, strategy, and mobilizing information. Third, the pages offering LPI in this sample were not wholesale replications of offline media content (RQ3). Many different websites offered a sizeable amount of original content, though much offline content was repurposed as well.

The first research question guiding this project focused on the provenance of online LPI. The results show that a wide range of information sources were returned by Google. This finding relates to a scholarly debate regarding the equity of Google search results in which some scholars (Hindman et al., 2003; Chakrabarti et al., 2005) argue that Google results for national political topics are disproportionately composed of pages from popular sites and other scholars (Fortunato et al., 2006) suggest that Google actually levels the playing field. In this exploration of local politics, concern about a “Googlearchy” – a tendency for major media organizations to dominate search results – proved to be unwarranted. Clearly, the pages provided by the major daily newspapers and local TV affiliates in Philadelphia are a critical component of the city’s online LPI environment. But, they are also joined by pages from candidates’ websites, relevant blogs, and electronic encyclopedias. These sites give the online audience information

choices that span the course of the campaign and the careers of the candidates. Some of them – like the pages from Philadelphia Forward (which focuses on local tax policy) or Wikipedia – treat the issues and candidates with a depth rarely seen in print or on TV. Any citizen interested in locating information about the 2007 Philadelphia mayoral campaign only had to execute a single, simple Google search to find a diverse proliferation of it.

The second RQ in this article targeted the substance of the webpages: specifically, what kind of mayoral campaign information could citizens locate online? In short, a citizen that relied solely on online sources of LPI in advance of the mayoral election would have received a full slate of issue, strategy, and mobilizing information. For a casual web surfer, this mix of coverage would be similar to what they might find in old media sources. At the same time, a motivated browser could find an unsurpassed depth of information online because space and distribution constraints are practically irrelevant to online publishing. The kind of LPI provided by the different sources – major local media outlets, independent bloggers, the candidates – varied some, but not in a way that suggested that a citizen who depended on any particular source would be handicapped. For example, pages emanating from independent blogs were second in number only to those from major local media outlets (77 to 71), were original 75% of the time, and were nearly interchangeable with those from major local media outlets in terms of the presence of strategy, issue, and mobilizing information. LPI is available online, from an array of sources. Much of it is unique and detailed – the question is whether anyone is reading it.

The size of the online audience for such LPI is, of course, difficult to determine. Yet, one important characteristic suggests that the blog posts and encyclopedia entries

about local politics can survive: they are being created by citizens who are motivated by passion not profit. The nature of the web allows any individual to publish content cheaply and this affords the opportunity for interest-based communities to develop. In turn, these communities populate sites like Young Philly Politics that contain rich, detailed LPI that track campaigns and, perhaps more importantly, community issues over time. Expansion of the local media environment to include voices like these is a significant contribution made possible by the internet. The existence of online LPI is not sufficient in and of itself to guarantee a large audience for it, but it is necessary for one to develop.

Finally, the third focus of this article was identifying “shovelware” from offline media outlets as well as other instances of content copying by blogs and aggregators. A large amount of the LPI online does directly emanate from preexisting coverage produced by daily newspapers and newscasts. But, the mayoral candidates and independent bloggers, in particular, offered novel content on the web that could not be found elsewhere. At this point, the web complements the existing local media infrastructure and gives citizens access to more LPI than they had in the recent past. Yet, the vibrance of Philadelphia’s online LPI environment does not appear wholly dependent upon the city’s major local media outlets. At first blush, this finding should relieve some anxiety related to the collapse of urban newspapers. But, even if bloggers are providing new commentary regarding local affairs, the analysis in this article is not designed to determine how dependent the new media voices are upon the initial news gathering of old media outlets. The extent of this second-level dependence is an important concern: an LPI environment that looks like it is flourishing online now may collapse without an adequate foundation. It is my sense that this is not the case; much of the blog coverage was borne of first-

person reporting. But, blogs may not yet be a full replacement for the ongoing beat-based news gathering and oversight provided by newspapers.

Two important limitations of this study should be noted. First, there are weaknesses in the construction of the sample. The sprawling fluidity of the internet makes it very difficult to design and capture a dataset for a content analysis that is neither reductive nor haphazard. The systematic Google searches used in this article give a fair chance of inclusion to any page or site – to the extent that Google results are fair. In doing so, it allows a broad overview of the relevant LPI available online. This approach differs dramatically, however, from a purposive analysis of content available on specific sites. This alternative might provide a better sense of the depth and nuance of the LPI online (from certain sources). An additional data collection challenge is the impermanence of the internet: pages change and disappear every day. Not every Google result was captured for this analysis. Second, the coding scheme places some constraints on the analyses that are possible. For example, the specific issues covered by different sources were not recorded. Doing so was not a priority for this article.

Conclusion

This article only begins to address the overarching questions about the fate of citizens, communities, and democracy in the new media environment. At least in Philadelphia, the internet is not devoid of useful LPI. Nor will all of this information cease to exist if the *Philadelphia Inquirer* goes under. But, online sources of LPI are far from maturity. There are no self-appointed beat reporters pounding the pavement, covering every in and out at city hall. And, though some hope may be drawn from the state of Philadelphia's online LPI environment, the situation may very well be different in

other communities. Media researchers and those interested in the practice of local politics must become more empirically oriented in evaluating the new media environment.

In chronicling the 1991 Philadelphia mayoral campaign, Kaniss (1995) looked extensively at the city's two major daily newspapers – with a combined circulation over 700,000 at the time – and evening TV newscasts – which were viewed by more than 1 million households every night at 6 P.M. Without a doubt, these media outlets told the tale of local politics that most Philadelphians knew in 1991. Today, the combined circulation of the *Inquirer* and *Daily News* is 450,000 and the audience for the 6 o'clock news is approximately 540,000 households. As these local media institutions decline, a shared city-wide experience is replaced with a fragmented landscape that offers great choice and depth. This shift may be beneficial in that it provides greater opportunity for citizens to become very knowledgeable and engaged. But, it also places the burden of action on citizens: instead of passively receiving a baseline amount of LPI, citizens need to seek such information. Without a newspaper on their doorstep or an update on the hour, it is not clear if they will or not.

¹ Some additional detail about the sample collection may be helpful. First, during the primary season, the searches ran 108 times every day – until Google blocked them under the assumption that they were an attempt at search engine optimization. Consequently, results for some days in the fourth, fifth, and sixth weeks were lost. Because of this, though the election was held on May 15th, the period of analysis here is set as April 1st through May 12th. During the general election period, the scripts were adjusted to run 24 times a day and were not disrupted.

Additionally, 278 unique pages is a small fraction of the potential pages that could have been included in the sample: in 12 complete weeks of searching, 7,560 search results would be recorded (12 weeks, 7 days, 30 rankings per day, 3 different searches). The sample in this article is not quite for 12 complete weeks, but more importantly, the vast majority of the results are redundant, day after day. Though there is some movement up and down in the rankings, the results returned by Google for each search were remarkably stable over time. Also, Because Bob Brady was eliminated from the campaign in the primary election, results for the search about him were only collected during the primary period.

The Total N – 278 – for analysis is less than the number of pages saved (313) which, in turn, is less than the total number of unique links included in the Google search results (336). The difference between 313 and 278 is caused by the inclusion, by Google, of some irrelevant pages. The other 23 missing results that are omitted because the pages they led to were no longer accessible online at the time of data collection.

² A full copy of the code book is available from the author upon request. Due to space constraints, it could not be included here.

³ P-values for all t-tests reported in this article are two-tailed.

Table 1: Sample Descriptives

Search	Unique Results	Pages Saved	Total N	Candidate/ Party	Traditional Local Media	Alternative Media	Encyclopedias & Aggregators	Independent Blogs
Nutter Primary	88	87	84	12	23	11	9	29
Nutter General	63	55	54	7	12	10	7	13
Brady Primary	78	69	69	12	23	5	9	16
Mayoral Primary	59	56	44	6	12	7	10	9
Mayoral General	48	46	33	1	9	13	8	5
Total	336	313	278	38	79	44	43	72
			74	15	20	10	14	14

Table 2: LPI Contained by Web Pages

Category	N	Strategy %	Issue %	Strategy 0-5	Issue 0-5	Mobilizing Information %
Candidate/Party	38	21.1%	21.1%	0.29	0.55	28.9%
Traditional Local Media	77	61.0%	54.5%	0.88	1.57	26.0%
Alternative Media	33	69.7%	81.8%	1.30	2.70	24.2%
Encyclopedias & Aggregators	39	69.2%	56.4%	1.21	2.03	35.9%
Independent Blogs	71	56.3%	54.9%	1.10	1.32	28.2%
Nutter Primary	84	60.7%	57.1%	1.07	1.92	15.5%
Nutter General	54	35.2%	55.6%	0.50	1.69	18.5%
Brady Primary	69	52.2%	53.6%	0.65	1.23	27.5%
Mayoral Primary	44	48.8%	29.3%	1.20	0.80	58.5%
Mayoral General	33	72.7%	45.5%	1.24	1.30	48.5%
Total: All Results		53.4%	50.5%	0.90	1.47	29.2%
Total: Top 10		56.8%	54.1%	1.00	1.82	31.1%

Table 3: Structural Features of Web Results

Source	% of Pages	Original	Reprint	Can Comment	Have Comments
Candidate/Party	14%	97%	0%	40%	13%
Traditional Local Media	27%	34%	61%	30%	12%
Alternative Media	12%	12%	85%	36%	12%
Encyclopedias & Aggregators	14%	56%	31%	15%*	5%*
Independent Blogs	25%	75%	13%	94%	42%
Total: All Results	-	58%	35%	46%	18%
Total: Top 10	-	65%	24%	39%	20%

* Pages from Wikipedia are not coded as positives here.

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